

CHAPTER 1

Revelry and Revolution

The Paradox of the 1950s

It is possible that other epochs of our history may have produced works of greater quality. But in terms of sheer volume there is no period associated with more musical performance or production than the decade of the 1950s. . . . The vast majority of the music listened to in Cuba for years afterward and almost all of what continues to be heard in Cuban exile communities comes from that same music. And a majority of the new music made abroad, among Cubans and Latinos more generally, has been influenced by those same recordings.

CRISTÓBAL DÍAZ AYALA, *Música cubana del areyto a la nueva trova*

Memories of Cuba in the 1940s and 1950s vary widely; they represent a point of tension between those sympathetic to the socialist revolution and others ambivalent or opposed to it. From the vantage of the present, pre-revolutionary memories can be used to justify the actions of revolutionaries or to criticize them and thus retain discursive significance. Authors often discuss the period in essentialized terms. Supporters of socialist Cuba have tended to characterize the “pseudo-republic” as one of the darkest periods of the country’s history. To them, midcentury life was fundamentally marred by the effects of government corruption and political violence as well as by widespread social ills—racism, class division, organized crime, gambling, prostitution, unemployment—and deficiencies in public education and other social services.¹ They stress Cuba’s subservience to North American interests and the fact that it had never achieved the autonomy aspired to in 1898 and 1933.

Cubans in exile, by contrast, often ignore or downplay the period’s problems. They instead emphasize its many positive features, including its large professional class, cosmopolitan intelligentsia, nightlife, media stars, and world-renowned performers. Cuba was undeniably one of the most affluent Latin American countries in the 1950s, and North Americans were not alone in considering it an unlikely site of socialist revolution (Llenera 1978:11). Its standard of living was high, roughly equal with that of poorer European countries such as Spain and Italy (Goldenberg 1965:120). The growth of its

entertainment and mass media industries in the mid-twentieth century was absolutely phenomenal. By 1958, the island already boasted 3 television channels and over 145 radio stations, including 5 national broadcasters, 45 shortwave stations, and 7 FM stations (Díaz Ayala 1981:213).² Cuba had more TV sets per capita than any other Latin American country (Fagen 1969:23). Cuban music became astoundingly popular during this decade at home and abroad, generating tremendous revenues. Curiously, the years of the bloodiest clashes with Batista's forces in the late 1950s were also those in which domestic musical entertainment achieved an absolute peak. Batista's final years in power are thus associated simultaneously with pleasure and political repression, hedonism and terror (Rojas 1998:68).

It is difficult to reconcile these distinct realities and to understand what life was actually like for local residents. Did most citizens recognize the social and political problems that existed around them? If so, did such things predominate in their daily experience? Did they appreciate their relative affluence as a country or chafe at the inequity of its distribution? Rosalie Schwartz, whose work focuses on representations of Cuba in the foreign and national media, has described presocialist Cuba as various things for various groups, "a holiday paradise in the midst of a political hell" (1997:167). She demonstrates that conflicting visions of the nation competed in the media even at that time. Especially after 1957, coverage of bombings, assassinations, and violence shared newspaper space with descriptions of carnival festivities, yacht races, golf championships, and openings of new cabarets. In many respects, debates over the 1959 revolution have manifested in a struggle over representations of the past, the editing and foregrounding of historical data.

This chapter provides an overview of the 1950s and examines the apparent disconnect between the growing political anarchy of the period and the artistic life with which it was associated. It focuses not on why revolution took place in Cuba or how the primarily reformist agenda of most rebels was quickly radicalized into a Marxist-Leninist position, as these paradoxes have been the focus of others (e.g., Ruiz 1968). Instead, it asks how a country with many social problems, and one eventually in a state of civil war, could have simultaneously been the site of amazingly vibrant musical development. Analysis suggests that the political conflicts of the period did not originate with Batista but reflected long-standing tensions related to foreign dominance and political corruption. The prominence of music resulted from the society's orientation toward tourism, its support of stage entertainment of virtually any kind, and the relatively direct access of Cuban performers to U.S. markets. The extent of artistic creativity also reflected a nation with

a wealth of noncommercial folklore whose performers were adept at combining foreign influences in unique ways with local traditions.

THE BACKGROUND: MIDCENTURY POLITICAL CHAOS

Cuba of the 1950s cannot be understood without considering political developments on the island since the onset of the Wars of Independence (1895–98). Hugh Thomas's massive 1,500-page study, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (1971), remains one of the best sources on the topic, eloquently presenting the entire period from the mid-nineteenth century through 1959 as a series of frustrated attempts to gain autonomy in the face of a Spanish colonial and North American neocolonial presence. These efforts continued long after ostensible independence was achieved in 1902. Cuban insurgents of the 1890s experienced many difficulties after the sinking of the battleship *Maine* in Havana's harbor and the resultant entry of the U.S. military into what had been a conflict between Spain and her colonies. North American troops, allied with Cuban *mambises*, managed to defeat the remaining Spanish forces in a matter of months and end the conflict. Subsequently, however, North Americans excluded Cuban representatives from peace negotiations and made decisions about the fate of Spanish possessions entirely on their own. They marginalized the leaders of other islands involved in the conflict—Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines—in a similar fashion.

Grievances against Spain prior to 1898 had been plentiful, but those experienced as the result of the U.S. presence caused considerable anger as well. Following a four-year military occupation, one that most Cubans fiercely opposed, came a series of additional humiliations. During the subsequent transfer of power, the McKinley administration refused to allow Cubans to choose their own political leaders freely, insisting on the election of candidates viewed as friendly to U.S. investment. They forced the new congress to adopt the Platt Amendment before relinquishing control. This notorious addition to the Constitution, in effect through 1934, fundamentally compromised local autonomy by establishing North American military bases on Cuban soil and allowing the United States to intervene at any time it believed its interests jeopardized.³ North Americans initiated a massive campaign of capital investment on the island beginning in 1902 that soon placed control of most agricultural and business revenues in their own hands. The importance of the U.S. ambassador increased to such an extent in the early twentieth century that virtually no important decision could be made in the Cuban legislature without authorization through his office. The U.S. pres-

ence had positive effects as well, including improvements in public sanitation and education and reform of legal practices (de Aragón 2002). Nevertheless, many Cubans felt humiliated by what they perceived as Washington's failure to treat them with the respect due a sovereign people.

Fulgencio Batista, the figure dominating Cuban politics in the decades prior to 1959, is perhaps best characterized as a pragmatist, someone more interested in personal gain than in leadership for its own sake. He had virtually no political ideology and shifted affiliation as necessary in order to maintain power. A mulatto career soldier of humble origins, Batista first came to national attention as a tool of the U.S. State Department. Its representatives helped him execute a successful military coup against Ramón Grau San Martín in 1934, considered too nationalistic and independent. The earliest years of Batista's rule witnessed the imposition of martial law and the repression of opposition leaders. He later legitimized himself to many by relaxing political restrictions and supporting progressive legislation related to health insurance, education, and women's suffrage.⁴ In the late 1930s, Batista reconciled himself with the Communist Party (PSP) and presided over the ratification of a new and surprisingly progressive Constitution. At the end of the decade, he won a fair election against Grau and served as president from 1940 to 1944.

The period from 1944 to 1952, often described as a moment of lost opportunity in Cuban politics, witnessed campaigns against government corruption and frustrated attempts to instigate the social reforms mandated by the new Constitution. Ironically, the individual who most completely betrayed the public trust at the time was Grau San Martín. Thomas (1971:738) describes his administration (1944–48) as "an orgy of theft, ill-disguised by emotional nationalistic speeches." The administration of President Carlos Prío Socarrás (1948–52) was similarly known for misuse of public funds, though it managed to pass some progressive legislation related to public works and (ironically) fiscal accountability. Despite the problems associated with Prío's presidency, historians have characterized it as relatively capable and well managed (Alvarez Díaz 1963:787). To many, the country seemed to be making a slow transition away from fraud and military coups and toward responsible leadership.

In this context, Batista once again declared his candidacy for the presidential elections of 1952. With his opponents favored to win, Batista staged a second military coup before elections could be held. He deposed Prío in a matter of hours, virtually without bloodshed. The public cared little about the fate of Prío, yet they were outraged over the affront to democracy represented by the act itself (Pérez-Stable 1993:36). Any sense of movement

toward rule by constitutional law had been “unceremoniously shunted aside” (Luis Pérez 1999:446) by Batista’s actions. Beginning a year or so later, groups vying for power abandoned political discussion in favor of violence. The process begun in the 1940s in which disputes increasingly came to be resolved by warring gangs of gunmen, policemen, ex-ministers, officers, and students (Thomas 1971:886) became even more pronounced.

This spirit of anarchy and growing radicalism is what fueled the famous attack organized by Castro on the Moncada garrison in Santiago on July 26, 1953. His 26th of July movement failed resoundingly in this initial effort, yet its very audacity brought Castro to national attention. The remainder of the decade witnessed an intensification of acts of violence against the government. It also saw the return of Castro, who had been exiled, and a group of supporters who eventually initiated guerrilla raids against military targets in Oriente. Wayne Smith (1987:38) mentions particular songs that the public came to associate with Castro’s *barbudos* (bearded soldiers), including the Mexican *ranchera* “La cama de piedra,” civil war songs from Spain, and “Son de la loma” by Miguel Matamoros. Cristóbal Díaz Ayala recalls others such as “Clave a Martí,” a favorite of Esther Borja’s, and the children’s song “El ratoncito Miguel” by Félix Caignet (pers. comm.). Batista eventually banned “Son de la loma” from the radio because of its associations with the insurgents and their “Radio Rebelde” broadcasts.

By 1957, random bombings and other sabotage were commonplace across the island, and the regime became more ruthless in its attempts to retain political control. Several of Batista’s military leaders gained notoriety for their bloody tactics: Carlos Tabernilla Doltz and Alberto Ríos Chaviano in Santiago and chiefs of the Secret Police Ugalde Carrillo and Captain Esteban Ventura in Havana, among others. By 1958, perceiving that Batista was absolutely discredited among Cubans of every political affiliation and class, the United States finally imposed an arms embargo against him. In May 1958, his army failed in a final offensive against the guerrillas and began losing territory. On New Year’s Eve 1958, Batista fled the country with a few of his closest supporters, leaving revolutionary forces free to take control of the capital.

MIDCENTURY SOCIETY

Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s *Tres tristes tigres*, written by an admirer of 1950s Cuba, provides a window on what it was like to live in Havana at that time. The novel depicts a city with a large, well-educated, cosmopolitan pro-

fessional class, enamored of its cabarets and clubs, given to sensual pursuits and the full enjoyment of life. This group, primarily of white/Hispanic origin, lived well and chose for the most part to ignore problems in the countryside and in marginal urban neighborhoods (Fig. 3). Ruiz (1968:153) describes the society as one “in which rich and poor lived in separate worlds.” Cuba had more telephones and cars per capita than virtually any other Latin American country, yet a large underclass could not afford them. Educational levels varied widely, with school enrollment in urban areas reaching nearly 70 percent but less than half that amount in rural areas. Many of those in smaller towns—about 40 percent of the population—had less than a third-grade education and lived in severe poverty (Pérez-Stable 1993:28).⁵ Land ownership tended to be concentrated in the hands of a small number of wealthy investors. Underemployment represented a pervasive problem, with about one-quarter of the labor force unable to secure adequate income. The centrality of sugar within Cuba’s economy led to massive seasonal job shortages; the approximately five hundred thousand individuals employed in this sector could count on steady work for only three months out of the year and the rest of the time struggled to get by.

Racial discrimination adversely affected much of the population. Biases against blacks and mulattos manifested themselves in many areas, including education, housing, and limited access to public and private recreational areas. During the Grau administration, only 5 of 50 senators and 12 of 127 representatives were nonwhite in a country whose population was at least one-third colored (Thomas 1971:1121).⁶ The chronic underfunding of public schools and a white-only matriculation policy in many private schools created significant educational barriers for Afro-Cubans (de la Fuente 2001:143–45). Businesses and professional organizations often refused to employ them, regardless of their qualifications, leading to their overrepresentation in manual labor and menial service jobs and in entertainment. Radio and television stations, cabarets, and hotels regularly discriminated against Afro-Cuban performers also. The immigration of musicians Mario Bauzá in the 1930s, Chano Pozo in the 1940s, and Arsenio Rodríguez in the 1950s to the United States, despite many racial problems there, resulted at least in part from the limitations facing blacks in Cuba (see, e.g., D’Rivera 1998:140).⁷ Even the famous Benny Moré was excluded from performing in *sociedades de recreo* such as the Havana Yacht Club and Casino Español because of his skin color (Gurza 2003:E8; Orejuela Martínez 2004:28). The promises of racial equality in the new Constitution of 1940 rang hollow, as they had never been supported by legislation that would allow for the prosecution of discriminatory acts (de la Fuente 2001:222–43).

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FIGURE 3. The impoverished Havana barrio of La Timba, 1951. Parts of this neighborhood still exist, but much of it was torn down to construct what is now the Plaza of the Revolution. Political leaders in Cuba since 1959 have employed images like this one as a means of characterizing the prerevolutionary era as plagued by severe social problems; *Bohemia* magazine reprinted countless similar photos in its “La Cuba de ayer” series. Archives, the Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami.

By the mid-1950s, American visitors spent about 30 million dollars a year in Cuba, with over seventy flights a week scheduled from Miami to Havana alone (Schwartz 1997:125, 168). Cruise ships made Havana a constant port of call. New luxury hotels appeared one after another as a complement to older establishments: the Vedado and Bruzón in 1952; the Colina and Lido in 1954 and 1955; the St. Johns, Capri, and Riviera in 1957; and the Havana Hilton and Deauville in 1958 (Schroeder 1982:459) represent only a few examples. Interest in music and dance—ballroom rumba, conga, *son*, mambo, chachachá—inspired many excursions (Luis Pérez 1999:210). Celebrities who frequented Cuba kept North American media attention focused on the island: golf trips by Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and John Kennedy; performances by singers Josephine Baker, Nat “King” Cole, Sarah Vaughn, Tony Martin, and Cab Calloway; vacation trips by Jack Dempsey, Marlon Brando,

Winston Churchill, TV host Steve Allen; and interviews with the ever-present Ernest Hemingway, among others.

For many midcentury visitors, Cuba's allure derived from its associations with sensuality, excess, and abandon. A holiday in Havana represented a physical getaway but also a space for moral laxity far from the confines of home. Schwartz (1997:121) notes that in the "transitional era between the clumsy groping of the drive-in movie and the boastful sexuality of the hot tub, Cuba offered tourists an acceptable way to succumb to temptation without scandalizing the neighbors. The suburban striver removed his necktie; the PTA president hid her hat and gloves." Marijuana (and cocaine for the wealthy) could be purchased easily in many areas. The sex industry in Havana had expanded by the 1950s to include over two hundred fifty brothels and at least ten thousand prostitutes, pornographic stage shows in the Shanghai Theater (Machover 1995:220), pornographic movies at the Lira and Molino Rojo, and the so-called dance academies (*academias de baile*), many of which functioned simultaneously as centers of music making and prostitution.

Ava Gardner fondly recalled Havana of 1951 as an "American playground, complete with gambling houses, whorehouses, and brightly lit cafes, every other one boasting a live orchestra" (Luis Pérez 1999:193). Arthur Schlesinger more critically wrote that he was both enchanted by Havana and appalled by the way the city "was being debased into a great casino and brothel for American businessmen over for a big weekend from Miami. My fellow countrymen reeled through the streets, picking up fourteen-year-old Cuban girls and tossing coins to make men scramble in the gutter. One wondered how any Cuban—on the basis of this evidence—could regard the U.S. with anything but hatred" (Pérez 1988:305). We should note that brothels existed across the island and were at least as popular among Cuban men as among visitors. In Havana, several distinct zones of prostitution existed, including the barrios of Colón in Centro Habana behind the America Theater, the dockside streets of Habana Vieja (especially San Isidro near the train station), and the beachfront area of Marianao. These catered to sailors and foreigners, but others—Atarés, sections of the Vía Blanca, the La Victoria neighborhood to the southeast of Carlos III Avenue—were frequented almost exclusively by locals (Tomás Fernández Robaina, pers. comm.).

The rise of casino gambling resulted largely from competition for tourist dollars between various Caribbean islands and Mexico. This industry too had links to the entertainment sector, as a majority of casinos provided live music. Gambling was an attractive business option in many respects. It gener-

ated high profits, required little initial investment, and created a buffer against fluctuating sugar prices. It did, however, attract organized crime as well. Cubans themselves, no strangers to shady business dealings, found that North American mobsters extended such activities far beyond the realm of government contracts. Mob activities in the 1920s focused on illegal liquor shipments during Prohibition. They became more extensive in the mid-1930s after Batista and figures such as New York's Meyer Lansky reached "incredibly profitable" (Hinckle and Turner 1981:25, 288) business agreements.

Crackdowns on crime under Senator Estes Kefauver beginning in 1950 made gaming illegal in much of the United States. This led to the eventual bulk sale of slot machines and other equipment to Cuba and increased the incentives for gangsters to relocate there. The Havana gambling industry grew rapidly by offering services to Americans that had been prohibited at home. In the mid-1940s, mobster Charles "Lucky" Luciano took control of the Jockey Club and Casino Nacional. Others arriving shortly thereafter included Sam Tucket and Moe Dalitz, Norman Entratter, and Santo Trafficante Jr. Together, they controlled a majority of high-profit tourist businesses (Schwartz 1997:128), sharing profits with Batista. Luis Pérez (1999:197, 471) describes Cuba of the late 1950s as supporting "a far-flung economy of commercialized vice," noting that gambling receipts alone exceeded \$500,000 monthly. Of course, the mob's investments in hotels, casinos, racetracks, and the like simultaneously enhanced nightlife and contributed to the attractiveness of Havana for visitors (Benjamin 1990:125). Batista's profits through links to organized crime, though significant, represented only a small part of his network of graft that functioned in many other sectors.

MIDCENTURY MUSICAL LIFE

Cuba offered its first institutionalized music instruction to the public with the founding of what became known as the Conservatorio Nacional in the 1880s (Orovio 1992:55). A series of additional schools appeared shortly thereafter, most notably the Conservatorio Municipal de La Habana in 1903. It received significant government subsidies and offered instruction at no charge to all who passed the entrance exams (Gramatges 1982:124–25). The primary barrier to enrollment for most working-class students, therefore, seems not to have been the cost of matriculation but rather factors related to the difficulty of finding work as a classical performer upon graduation. Additionally, the school provided no stipends or loans to students to support them while enrolled. Nevertheless, a surprising number of performers

from poor families, white and black, managed to train and graduate alongside members of the middle classes. Initially directed by Guillermo Tomás, the Conservatorio Municipal passed under the control of Amadeo Roldán in 1936 and eventually gave rise to an important national school of composition, the Grupo de Renovación Musical. Prominent individuals associated with it in the 1940s and 1950s include the group's founder, José Ardévol, along with Hilario González, Harold Gramatges, Gisela Hernández, Argeliers León, and Julián Orbón. Mario Bauzá, Juan Blanco, Paquito D'Rivera, and Chucho Valdés are but a few of the renowned figures who completed their studies at the Conservatorio Municipal prior to 1959.

By the late 1920s, approximately thirty-five additional conservatories had been established in Havana alone, many opening branches across the island. The city's Pro-Arte Musical Society (established in 1918) and Sociedad Liceum and Lawn Tennis Club regularly sponsored a variety of classical events.⁸ Cuba boasted an excellent symphony orchestra as of the early 1920s and later featured world-class guest artists and conductors such as Kleiber, Stravinsky, and Villa-Lobos.⁹ In 1931, María Muñoz de Quevedo established a choral society, with José Ardévol creating a professional chamber orchestra shortly thereafter. Eduardo Calero Martín's 1,100-page compendium, *Cuba musical* (1929), with lists and photos of over 160 smaller music schools and approximately 1,850 music teachers, makes apparent the extent of interest in music at the time. The government encouraged involvement in the arts with the establishment in 1934 of a cultural division within the ministry of education (Weiss 1985:119). Its influence, however, was limited, as was its patronage, though it did offer nominal funds to classical ensembles.

Music education and performance continued to face financial limitations in subsequent decades. José Ardévol's chamber group received only meager support from patrons, in part because its members wished to promote early music and twentieth-century composition in addition to more-standard European repertoire; it disbanded in 1952 for lack of funding.¹⁰ The Havana Philharmonic faced a similar crisis a few years later (Acosta 2002:12, 53–58). José Lezama Lima's literary magazine *Orígenes* also ceased publication in 1956 because of insufficient funds, owing to the withdrawal of support by José Rodríguez Feo. Little if any music by twentieth-century Cuban composers was published within Cuba before 1959 (Ardévol 1966:74). In general, salaries offered to performers in the symphony were meager, averaging about one hundred pesos a month and paid only for half the year.

Nevertheless, throughout the 1940s and 1950s the numbers of formally trained performers continued to grow. Census data from 1943 indicates that out of a total population of 4,800,000, 3,402 Cubans identified themselves as

full-time musicians (Valdés Cantero 1988:7). By the early 1950s, that number had more than doubled (Oficina Nacional de los Censos, Demográfico y Electoral 1953:1). Many belonged to the Federación de Autores Musicales de Cuba, presided over by Ernesto Lecuona and Rodrigo Prats. Performers worked for the most part in cinemas, in theaters, on the radio, in municipal bands, in dance orchestras, and as private teachers. In a 1957 study, UNESCO recognized Cuba to be, “in proportion to its population, the country with the largest number of musical conservatories and academies” in all of Latin America (Gramatges 1982:39). It is stunning to consider that the many thousands who were teaching or studying in music schools represented only a small fraction of the overall number of active performers.

Statistics on full-time musicians obscure the fact that a much larger body of mostly untrained individuals worked alongside them. It is this “shadow group” that actually typifies the midcentury artist. Most came from working-class backgrounds and grew up playing folk music of various sorts, styles largely underappreciated and in some cases persecuted prior to 1959. Approximately 75 percent were black or mulatto (Valdés Cantero 1988:22, 44). Music making represented one of many work skills for them that frequently included agricultural labor, construction, carpentry, or cigar making. Even the most successful—Chano Pozo, Sindo Garay, María Teresa Vera—were often functionally illiterate. Some had studied with private teachers and could read music. Others, including a majority of percussionists, singers, and guitarists, were primarily self-taught. A fair number became successful despite a lack of institutional training, but others did not, contenting themselves with jam sessions among friends and tips earned in restaurants or on street corners. While artists of all backgrounds flourished in the 1950s, the group that made the greatest impact nationally and internationally was working-class blacks, as had been the case for over a century. Their very marginality and lack of access to higher education seems to have led to an emphasis on orality, improvisation, face-to-face communication, and others skills fundamental to the appeal of popular performers.

The defining element affecting musicians during the 1940s and 1950s, especially untrained musicians, was the difficulty of securing adequate pay. Few lucrative job opportunities existed, and—just as in capitalist countries now—musicians generally worked less glamorous “day jobs” that covered the rent. In theory, performers chose where and how often they played and what they would charge, but of course all such factors were subject to the whims of the marketplace. Flutist Melquíades Fundora Dino of the *charangas* Sensación and Sublime (2001, interview) remembers that the typical performer lived precariously on a salary of 20 to 30 pesos a month. Music

teachers and formally trained instrumentalists fared somewhat better: salaries for whites averaged about 55 pesos a month, and about 43 for Cubans of color (Valdés Cantero 1988:31–35). Instrumentalists in cabarets or those fortunate enough to sign a contract in a large club or for a major radio broadcaster such as CMQ or Radio Habana Cuba received substantial union wages, typically \$7.82 U.S. per performance and double pay after 3 A.M. (Leonardo Acosta, pers. comm.). Overnight touring groups could earn as much as \$50 a day on the road. In the mid-1950s, performance on television programs such as *Jueves de Partagás*, *El Cabaret Regalías*, *El Show de Mediodía*, and the *Bar Melódico de Farrés* became an option for some, paying musicians \$18 an hour for rehearsals and \$36 an hour for performances in house orchestras (Leonardo Acosta, pers. comm.). The best-known groups charged high prices and lived well; singer Tito Gómez made 400 pesos a month base pay singing with the orchestra of Julio Brito in the Sevilla Biltmore Hotel, as one example (Martínez 1995:7) and received additional income from shows elsewhere. Members of the Orquesta Aragón earned between \$500 and \$3,000 a month; violinist Celso Valdés Santandreu managed to build a house for himself and buy luxury cars after playing with the band for only three years (pers. comm.).

Nightclubs and cabarets of various sorts represented the highest profile establishments supporting music, but they were not the most numerous. Cubans did most of their day-to-day socializing, dancing, and performing in neighborhood *sociedades de recreo*, or recreation societies. These reputable, “family-friendly” establishments flourished in the mid-twentieth century until they were abolished in 1962 (Díaz Ayala 1981:216). Havana telephone directories from the late 1950s list over 130 of them, suggesting that hundreds more existed across the island. They were organized in several different ways: by work center (streetcar or cigar workers’ societies), by ethnicity (the Centro Asturiano or Gallego for those from particular regions in Spain), by neighborhood (the Liceo de Guanabacoa, El Recreo de Regla), by common interest (the Cultural Club), or by social class (the Club Atenas and Minerva for successful black professionals, the Habana Yacht Club or Vedado Tennis Club for their white counterparts). A large number served almost exclusively working-class Afro-Cuban clientele. These included the Marianao Social Club and the now-famous Buena Vista Social Club, also in Marianao.¹¹ Their segregation was one factor that led to their demise, as revolutionary leaders frowned on institutions believed to perpetuate racial divisions.

The best-known performers and composers of the 1950s prioritized the commercial viability of music over other factors, striving to generate large

audiences by providing accessible entertainment. In general, they avoided issues of social critique in favor of lyrics foregrounding humor or romance. Dance pieces and boleros dominated their repertoire. The music industry of the 1950s placed great emphasis on the physical appearance of artists and strove to make their stage presentations memorable. Cabaret spectacles reached an absolute peak at this time, replete with sequined gowns, elaborate group choreographies, and flashy arrangements for large orchestras. Growth in the tourist sector through 1956, increased income from gambling, an expanding local economy, and other factors led to a dramatic rise in commercial music making. Because of the number of performers, their professional options, and the extent of their influence abroad, the “fabulous fifties” (Díaz Ayala 1981:205) represented a period of phenomenal opportunity for popular musicians. By contrast, performers of folk music had relatively few options. Biases against African-derived genres especially meant that those involved with such repertoire could rarely perform in public or record. Music schools included very little instruction related to traditional music of any sort (Lino Neira, pers. comm.). Folklore flourished in the black working-class neighborhoods of major cities and in rural towns but did not often appear on the radio or television. Its status might be likened to that of black gospel in the United States, given its strong influence on popular music but its near total invisibility for years in the marketplace.¹²

Noncommercial folk music traditions of many kinds existed, however. Examples include the songs of regional *santorales* (patron saint festivals); improvisational *música guajira* events with their varied string instruments; traditional rumba; *comparsa* carnival bands of distinct sorts in various cities; Haitian-influenced folklore such as *gagá* and *tumba francesa* in the east; Kongo *tambor yuka* and Palo ceremony; Abakuá processional music and other religious songs and drumming derived from various parts of Africa; and the *pregones* (songs) of street vendors. Few studied or wrote about folklore at this time, and government agencies were no exception. The only center dedicated to such endeavors was the Instituto Musical de Investigaciones Folklóricas, created through the efforts of Odilio Urfé in 1948 (Barnet 1983:133). Owing to its meager resources and the lack of middle-class interest in the subject, the institute had little impact on prerevolutionary cultural life. Singers with a background in folklore who did achieve commercial success tended to adapt their music to the marketplace by performing *música guajira “de salón,”* such as that written by Guillermo Portabales, or dance repertoire based on Afro-Cuban religious themes as popularized by Celina González and Reutilio Domínguez, or by incorporating elements of folk traditions into cabaret acts.¹³

Poets, novelists, and classical musicians worked in the shadow of the surrounding commercial culture just as folk musicians did, playing for a circumscribed public. To be an academic or intellectual in prerevolutionary Cuba was to be largely ignored by the local population (Machover 1995:18). It was almost impossible to make a viable living as a conservatory artist or in the humanities; almost everyone who chose such a career was independently wealthy or held additional jobs in unrelated fields. Carlos Alberto Montaner, by no means a Castro supporter, describes the Cuban bourgeoisie of the 1950s as decidedly shallow in cultural terms (see Montaner 1985:145). Others agree that before the revolution writers Virgilio Piñeira, Alejo Carpentier, and Lydia Cabrera, painters Wifredo Lam and Amelia Peláez, and composers Harold Gramatges and José Ardévol were practically unknown within Cuba itself (Kirk and Padura Fuentes 2001:21, 96; de la Vega 2001:55). Ardévol commented in 1956 that there was perhaps no other place in Latin America where classical composers received less moral and material support than Havana (Ardévol 1966:70). To the extent that an audience for classical music existed among the middle class, it supported nineteenth-century European repertoire rather than Cuban composers.

Yet despite their relative anonymity at home, these and other cultural figures thrived and often became internationally recognized. Ballet and theater, too, had modest domestic audiences. Alicia Alonso's government-subsidized dance troupe performed to enthusiastic audiences in the Teatro Auditorium, though some middle-class families refused to let their daughters take part because they considered sweating unseemly (Kirk and Padura Fuentes 2001:45). Nearly a dozen acting troupes staged presentations in 1950s Havana and included works of a decidedly international character by Sartre, Ionesco, and others (V́ctor Batista, pers. comm.). The frequency of classical music recitals, though modest, continued to grow during the 1950s in university settings, in middle-class *sociedades de recreo*, and on concert stages. The cultural society *Nuestro Tiempo* sponsored performances of works by Aurelio de la Vega, Juan Blanco, Julián Orbón, and other contemporary composers. De la Vega wrote the first pieces of serial music in Cuba in 1957 (Machover 1995:199).

The only exceptions to the relative marginality of classical artists were individuals who wrote "light" pieces for the musical theater or the piano. Opera and *zarzuela* (nationalist opera) compositions by Rodrigo Prats, Gonzalo Roig, Ernesto Lecuona, and others consistently generated large audiences. Many of the arias from their stage works were further popularized through sheet music sales. The number of internationally renowned vocalists who interpreted Cuban *zarzuela* works is striking: Ester Borja, Miguel

de Grandy, Maruja González, Zoraida Marrero, Marta Pérez, and so forth. Theaters in Havana—the Blanquita, Encanto, Fausto, Martí, Payret, Campoamor—presented a variety of music and dance of this nature in addition to other acts (Díaz Ayala 1981:217). Light classical compositions by Adolfo Guzmán, Félix Guerrero, and others received a warm welcome there, as did performances by municipal bands.

Jazz never became widely popular but established an audience in Havana and influenced many local genres. The Club Cubano de Jazz encouraged figures from the States to perform there (Tommy Dorsey, Woody Herman, Philly Joe Jones, Zoot Sims, Sarah Vaughan), as did major cabarets. Cuban vocal groups such as the Cuarteto Las D'Aida, the Cuban Pipers, and Los Cavaliers incorporated jazz elements into their compositions and sang regularly on the radio (Acosta 2000:163). Jazz-influenced *flin* singers rose to prominence at this time—José Antonio Méndez, Francisco Fellove, César Portillo de la Luz—along with groups such as Los Armónicos and Los Bucaneros. Dance orchestras (the Casino de la Playa, the Havana Swing, the Riverside, the Armando Romeu, the Bebo Valdés orchestra) experimented with the sound of big bands from the United States in instrumentation, arrangements, and harmony. The first experiments in fusing jazz and Afro-Cuban rhythms, including the famous collaborations between Mario Bauzá, Chano Pozo, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and others in New York, date from this time. Various venues featured jazz jam sessions, including the Las Vegas Club and (especially) the Tropicana with its house orchestra under the direction of Armando Romeu (Acosta 2002:13).

The midcentury recording industry grew at a surprising rate, protected from foreign competitors by tariff legislation passed under Grau and Batista. Its LPs were of sufficient quality to attract the attention of RCA and Capitol Records; both eventually signed contracts to have their LPs printed in Cuba as of the early 1950s (Cristóbal Díaz Ayala, pers. comm.). Foreign companies had recorded on the island since the turn of the century, but as of 1944 Panart established the first local label in Havana (Lam 1999b:99). In the early 1950s, it opened additional facilities in Rancho Boyeros and San Agustín, financed largely through high record sales during the chachachá craze (José Reyes, pers. comm.). Panart soon had many local competitors: Puchito, formed in 1952 by Jesús Gorís; Kubaney, formed in 1955 and directed by Mateo San Martín; Montilla, established at roughly the same time and specializing in *zarzuela*; Gema, established in 1957 and owned by Ernesto Duarte and Guillermo Álvarez Guedes; Maype, formed in 1959 under Arturo Machado Díaz; and Meca, created in the same year under Juan Manuel Tabares and Fernando Senra (Díaz Ayala 1981:226–56). Together

these companies pressed millions of records; Panart alone produced five hundred thousand a year by mid-decade. In conjunction with the discs of Cuban music produced on foreign labels, most notably Seeco and RCA Victor in New York, they helped generate and support strong international demand for Cuban repertoire. All major performers of the period, including those who remained in the country after the revolution, established their reputations through recordings made in the “fabulous fifties.”

Havana offered a surprisingly wide selection of films from Mexico, Spain, Argentina, and Europe as well as the United States. These were available in many movie theaters—the America, Astral, Cuatro Caminos, Encanto, Fausto, Florencia, Olympic, Reina, Santos Suárez, Warner, Radio Cine—not only specialized locations. The domestic film industry, however, never achieved much recognition prior to 1959. Cuban directors and playwrights created relatively few movies, and fewer still of quality. A large percentage of those that did appear were musicals, beginning in the 1930s and 1940s with *Sucedió en La Habana*, *Romance del palmar*, *El frutero*, *Como un arrullo de palmas*, and others, featuring scores by local composers (Ernesto Lecuona, Gilberto Valdés). The 1950s was best known for its *rumbera* films, produced primarily in Mexico. Output in that country far exceeded Cuba’s, and Mexico absorbed a fair amount of Cuban screen talent over time. Many women, Cuban and Mexican, achieved recognition as film *rumberas* (María Antonieta Pons, Ninón Sevilla, Miroslava, Amalia Aguilar, Olguita Chaviano, Lina Salomé). Examples of this genre include *Música, mujeres y piratas* (1950) and *Hotel de muchachas* (1951). *Rumbera* film plots tended to be formulaic and uninspired. Machover (1995:216) characterizes them as tales of “virgins dragged into prostitution, pistols and fistfights” that focused on little more than “the hips of a female in heat . . . moving wildly to the rhythm of a few drums.” While exaggerated, his critique contains more than a grain of truth. *Rumbera* films revolved around women, music, and dance to a much greater extent than message.

The number of performers in the midcentury Cuban entertainment industry is stunning. Entire books have been written on this subject, and a mere mention of the major figures would require pages.¹⁴ Collazo 1987 lists sixteen well-known *orquestas típicas* performing actively between 1940 and 1960, as well as fifteen vocal duos, twenty-two trios, forty-four *conjuntos bailables*, and over three hundred established solo vocalists along with assorted jazz bands, vocal ensembles, dance acts, *excéntricos musicales*, and other categories of performers. Havana boasted at least ninety nightclubs in the 1950s, rivaling the entertainment in capital cities of developed countries. Reviewing the contents of magazines dedicated to midcentury nightlife

such as *Show* and *Gente*, one cannot help but note with amazement the magnitude and extravagance of entertainment in urban areas (Fig. 4). The number of internationally recognized artists and groups emerging at this time is almost beyond belief: singers Celia Cruz, La Lupe, and Benny Moré; *filin* artists Ángel Díaz and Omara Portuondo; traditional *soneros* Guillermo Portabales and Francisco Repilado; the *charangas* of José Fajardo, Antonio Arcaño, and the Orquesta Aragón; the *conjuntos* of Arsenio Rodríguez, Félix Chappottín, and the Sonora Matancera; Dámaso Pérez Prado with his mambo; and the jazz bands Orquesta Riverside and Orquesta Siboney, to mention only a handful. The 1950s was a decidedly internationalist period in which bands toured constantly throughout the Americas and Europe, and foreign pop stars—Josephine Baker, Nat “King” Cole, Xavier Cugat, Carmen Miranda, Pedro Infante, the Trio Los Panchos, Ima Sumac, Libertad Lamarque—appeared just as often on Cuban stages.

Havana was the unquestioned center of nightlife, offering diverse entertainment options for locals and visitors alike. Bars and restaurants could be found everywhere, among the most famous being the Floridita, said to have been frequented by Hemingway, and Sloppy Joe’s on Zulueta Street. Clubs and cabarets existed in all sizes, from smaller, intimate, and bohemian (the Alí Bar, the Las Vegas, the Palermo, the Alloy) to lavish and expansive (the Montmartre, Salón Rojo, the Sans Souci).¹⁵ Some were located in the heart of the city, for instance in the hotels of Vedado and Habana Vieja, while others (the Bambú, Johnny’s Dream Club, Club 66, at least a half-dozen on the beaches of Marianao) operated at a discreet distance.¹⁶ Interestingly, Cubans themselves represented the majority of the patrons rather than foreigners (Díaz Ayala 1981:212). The vast majority of entertainers performed to live musical accompaniment.

Perhaps the most well-known cabaret was the Tropicana, opening its doors for the first time in 1939. After its acquisition by Martín Fox in 1941, the establishment expanded considerably, opening a casino and featuring an extravagant dinner show (Lam 1999b). The latter presented acts ranging from blackface comedy with Alberto Garrido and Federico Piñeiro to singers and musicians to the legendary dance choreographies of Roderico “Rodney” Neyra, often with as many as seventy dancers in elaborate costumes. Band-leaders working in the Tropicana over the years included pianists Alfredo Brito and Armando Romeu. Other renowned instrumentalists filled the house orchestra: pianist Bebo Valdés, arranger Chico O’Farrill, trumpeter Chocolate Armenteros, and saxophonist Paquito D’Rivera (D’Rivera 1998:61). Schwartz estimates that this establishment, in conjunction with the cabarets in the Riviera, Nacional, and Capri Hotels, generated \$50,000 weekly in gross

— stages.
[FIGURE]
[Figure 4
about here]



FIGURE 4. Floor show in the Cabaret Montmartre, Havana. This image comes from the December 1955 issue of *Show* magazine. Soprano María Marcos appears center stage in black as part of the revue “Midnight in Paris.” Supporting singers and dancers include Olga Navarro, Teté Machado, Ofelia Gómez, Carmita González, Ada Armil, and Emy de Mendoza. The thousands of photos from *Show* and related publications testify to the splendor and extravagance of Cuban nightlife at this time, even as the country moved closer to open civil war.

revenues by the mid-1950s (Schwartz 1997:197). Revenues from gambling subsidized the floor shows and made opulent stage presentations economically viable.

Some authors (e.g., Luis Pérez 1999) emphasize the strong influence of foreign, especially North American, culture on midcentury Cuba and suggest that local traditions were in the process of being diluted or lost. Certainly foreign influences abounded in Cuba, from Christmas trees to pancakes to rock and roll. Nationalists on the island have noted this since at least the turn of the twentieth century (Linares 1970:106–107), associating North American culture with political and economic dominance; such criticisms appear even more frequently after the 1959 revolution. However, Cuba as an island has always been a nexus of influences; this diversity contributes to the richness of its art forms. The *contradanzas* and *danzas*, for instance, which constitute Cuba’s earliest national music genres, could never have developed without strong influences from France, Haiti, and Spain. It is probable that foreign influences would have increasingly become a liability rather than an asset had Cuba remained part of the capitalist world after 1959. Yet one thing is certain: some of the decade’s most characteristic forms of expression—the jazz-influenced big band music of Benny Moré

or *flin* repertoire—could never have developed without ties to North America. Later decades, especially the late 1960s through the 1980s, witnessed the more exclusive promotion of local heritage, but this did not lead invariably to better or even more “Cuban” music.

MUSIC OF THE 1950S: MAMBO AND CHACHACHÁ

The preceding commentary offers some insight into the wide variety of music in mid-twentieth-century Havana. This gamut of styles notwithstanding, most recordings were danceable and demonstrated the influence of the *son*. Some discussion of the major musical forms of the 1950s would seem appropriate, given the extent of their influence. Modern *son* developed in eastern Cuba at the turn of the twentieth century as a regional folk genre. It became popular across the island in the mid-1920s, gradually supplanting European-influenced traditions as the country’s favorite form of music. By the 1940s, dance bands usually performed the *son* in an ensemble known as a *conjunto*. The *conjunto* format extended earlier instrumentation (*tres*, guitar, claves, maracas, acoustic bass, bongo, trumpet) to include two or three trumpets, piano, and conga drums. Stylistically, *conjuntos* are the direct antecedent of modern salsa bands. They remained popular in later years but competed for the public’s attention with new ensembles, including Cuban jazz bands and *charangas*. The chachachá, first performed by *charanga* orchestras, developed out of the incorporation of *son* elements into the *danzón*, described in greater detail below. The mambo emerged from fusions of *son* elements with jazz band repertoire. Both genres adapted the final *montuno* section of the *son*. In each case, its syncopated rhythms and cyclical form were elaborated with new instruments and choreography.

The *son*’s influence underscores the important contributions of working-class black artists during this period. Improvisation (vocal and instrumental) became more central to commercial music, as did open-ended “jamming,” reflecting a preference for spontaneity rather than entirely precomposed or notated pieces. The 1940s and 1950s also represented the first period in which percussionists on conga drums not only found a place within commercial ensembles but became featured soloists in their own right. Candido Camero, Armando Peraza, Chano Pozo, Mongo Santamaría, Carlos “Patato” Valdés, and a host of others achieved artistic acclaim on Afro-Cuban instruments that had been widely spurned only a few decades earlier.

In the early 1920s, the *danzón* was Cuba’s most popular form of national music. *Danzones* developed out of nineteenth-century ballroom repertoire,

patterned after French and Spanish court music but infused with local rhythms. In the early twentieth century, the instrumentation of *danzón* groups consisted primarily of violins, flute, piano, acoustic bass, timbales, and the *güiro*, a gourd scraper. The groups were known as *charangas* or *charangas francesas*.¹⁷ Early-twentieth-century *danzones* were instrumental, but beginning in the 1920s the *danzón cantado*, or sung *danzón*, gained popularity as well. This reflects the public's growing interest in boleros, North American jazz ballads, Broadway show tunes, and Tin Pan Alley repertoire. In 1929, another variation emerged: the *danzonete*, first popularized by Aniceto Díaz. This composition incorporated both the vocalist of the *danzón cantado* and a short *montuno*-like coda inspired by the *son*. (Torres 1995:194–95). Early *danzón-son* fusions of this sort incorporated more extended harmonies than had *sones* previously and featured unison breaks known as *golpes* that would remain prominent in compositions of the 1940s and 1950s.

Danzón repertoire demonstrates a number of influences from sub-Saharan African culture, most notably (1) the incorporation of rhythmic figures such as the *cinquillo*, (2) the organization of melodies around a particular *clave*, or rhythmic timeline, (3) the presence of the *güiro*, and (4) a unique performance style on the timbales involving strikes on the metal shell of the drum as well as the head. Nevertheless, in early-twentieth-century Cuba these influences were not widely recognized. Conventional wisdom held that the *danzón* was the epitome of national expression but that it derived from European sources. The decision on the part of Antonio Arcaño's group to extend the open-ended, improvisational *montunos* at the end of the *danzón* and to add additional percussion to the ensemble thus represented a significant and controversial change. Band members referred to the new works as *danzones de nuevo ritmo*, *danzones* in a new rhythm. They featured syncopated melodies, new bell patterns played on the timbales, and the incorporation of conga drums to create a driving sound (Santos 1982:5). Cellist Orestes López and his brother Israel "Cachao" composed one of the first pieces in this style in 1937 while with Arcaño. The repeated figures played by the band in the *montuno* were referred to as *guajeos*. *Danzones* in a new rhythm contributed directly to the emergence of both the mambo and the chachachá in the following years.

One of the reasons for the heavy promotion of the chachachá in the early 1950s is that *charanga* ensembles, faced with competition from *conjuntos* and Cuban jazz bands, found their audiences shrinking. On the one hand, their most faithful public, middle-class *danzón* dancers, did not immediately warm to the *danzones de nuevo ritmo*. They had trouble keeping time to the new syncopated beat and still viewed *son* influence as suspect in any

case because of its origins among working-class blacks (Torres 1995:209). On the other hand, younger Cubans no longer danced the traditional *danzón* enthusiastically or even learned to execute all of its varied steps. Faced with this dilemma, *charangas* adopted the chachachá instead of the *danzón* as a means of attracting a wider audience. The new music was essentially a slower and less syncopated version of the *son*. Its bass patterns emphasized the downbeat rather than weak beats, and its timbal bell patterns marked steady quarter- and eighth-note rhythms. Chachachá choreography was similar to that of the *son* as well but included a shuffle step every four beats. The sound of this shuffle apparently inspired the name of the genre.

Violinist and composer Enrique Jorrín (1926–87) wrote some of the most popular early chachachás beginning in about 1953. At that time, he formed part of the Orquesta América. It was this ensemble that made famous the unison vocals and overall sound of the new genre that would be further promoted by José Fajardo (1919–2001), the Orquesta Aragón, and others. Example 1 comes from the final vamp of “Que nos separa” by José Fajardo. The instruments notated are accompanied by congas, timbales, and *güiro*. The relatively straight bass line and slow tempo of “Que nos separa” make the piece easy to dance, yet it retains the chord sequence, call-response format, syncopated *guajeo*, and improvisational emphasis associated with the *son*. Unison vocals alternate in this example with Fajardo’s flute solo.

Mambo has been used in various ways over the years and merits clarification. The word comes from a Kongo term meaning “conversation,” “message,” or “chant” and originally referred to acts of magic projected through song during religious events (Ortiz [1950] 1965:235, 244).¹⁸ Since then it has acquired new meanings, but in reference to popular music it has two common usages. The first is simply a *montuno*-like sectional interlude within a composition, during which one or more syncopated melodic riffs is repeated many times by strings, horns, or both. This kind of mambo usually represents a climax point within a composition, just as the original mambo did in a sacred context. One can understand why Orestes López chose to give his modified *danzón* of 1937 the title “Mambo,” given the nature of the looping violin phrases in the final vamp. Various Cuban dance bands have referred to “mambos” in this sense since that time (Acosta 1983:69). The practice may have originated with Orestes and Israel López or in the *conjunto* of Arsenio Rodríguez (he later claimed to have invented the genre),¹⁹ or it may have caught on among several groups more or less simultaneously.

The second, related meaning of *mambo* refers to a distinct musical genre (not just a section) for Cuban jazz band based exclusively on the final sec-

—solo.
[FIGURE]
[Example 1
about here]

EXAMPLE 1. Excerpt, final segment of the chachachá “Que nos separa,” recorded by José Fajardo and his orchestra (Fajardo 1995).

The musical score is arranged in five systems. The first system includes staves for Flute, Violin, Chorus, Piano, and Bass. The Flute part begins with a rest followed by a melodic phrase. The Violin part provides a rhythmic accompaniment. The Chorus part includes the lyrics: "pue - do vi - vir tan le - jos de tí Te quie - ro sen - tir muy den - tro de mí". The Piano part features a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The Bass part provides a simple harmonic foundation. The second system continues the instrumental parts. The third system shows the Flute playing a more complex melodic line. The fourth system includes the word "No" in the Chorus part. The fifth system concludes the excerpt with a final cadence in all parts.

tion of the *danzones de nuevo ritmo*. This is the meaning that has gained the most recognition internationally, in large part because of the success of recordings by bandleader Dámaso Pérez Prado beginning in 1949. The “big band mambo” draws on North American culture nearly as much as Caribbean sources; perhaps not surprisingly, it has been performed in Mexico, the United States, and elsewhere at least as often as in Cuba itself. The primary exponents of this mambo represented an artistic vanguard that wanted to “stretch”

the sound of dance repertoire to include new harmonies and new forms of orchestration. Aside from Pérez Prado, others who contributed to its development included pianists Bebo Valdés and René Hernández. They all experimented with the big band format, searching for new ways to reconcile its sonorities with the rhythms of Afro-Cuban folklore. Cuban audiences reacted tepidly to their compositions at first, perceiving them as too experimental. Yet the mambo had a strong impact on domestic dance bands in later years, including the wildly popular *banda gigante* of Benny Moré.

The sound of mambo bands was distinct from North American jazz bands despite their use of similar horn and rhythm sections. To begin with, Cuban groups incorporated the conga drums in addition to the drum set, and in the late 1950s, some used the bongo and timbales as well. Percussion featured more prominently in the overall mambo mix than was common in jazz at that time. Melodic lines played by the saxophones, trumpets, and trombone(s) tended to be more repetitive and syncopated than in jazz. The formal structure of most mambos consisted of infinite variations on a single repeated section in the same key rather than a progression through finite sections in different keys. Perhaps most strikingly, the texture of the mambo was created through a process of layering melodies against one another instead of foregrounding a principal melody against supporting harmonies. Acosta (2000:167–68) describes the sound in this way:

In the face of the predominant tendency in jazz since the 1930s to fill up ever more completely the sound of the orchestra, fusing instruments from different sections . . . [Pérez Prado and other composers of the mambo] do exactly the opposite, establishing distinct planes of sound in two basic registers: one high with the trumpets and another low with the saxes in constant counterpoint. Additionally, the function of the horn sections is more typically “melodic-rhythmic” rather than “melodic-harmonic.”

This kind of structure, involving interlocking hocket melodies and recurrent ostinato figures lending themselves to improvisation, reflects the influence of African aesthetics. Not surprisingly, other genres such as the folkloric rumba and the *guaracha* are structured in essentially the same fashion and seem to have been used as a conceptual model (consciously or unconsciously) for the creation of the genre. One should note that mambo choreography as popularized by Pérez Prado was distinct from that of the Cuban *son*. Dancers’ appropriation of the word *mambo* over the years has been as confusing as musicians’, since they use it to describe the basic international salsa step (a fusion of choreography derived from the *son* with influences

from swing), a specific New York variant of salsa choreography (also referred to as “mambo on two”), and the original step without distinction.

The importance of Dámaso Pérez Prado (1916–89) to the development of the mambo genre can hardly be overemphasized; it is he who should be given credit for defining it. Pérez Prado grew up surrounded by Afro-Cuban folklore in his native Matanzas. His mother was a schoolteacher, and his father sold newspapers. As a child he studied classical piano with Rafael Somavilla at the Principal School of Matanzas, and as a young man he played organ and piano in local cinemas and clubs.²⁰ In 1942, Pérez Prado moved to Havana; he began performing in local cabarets such as the Kursaal and Pennsylvania and soon thereafter became a pianist and arranger for the Orquesta Casino de la Playa. His arrangements and piano solos as part of that group demonstrate an interest in melodic syncopation, dissonance, and extended harmonies, including tone clusters.²¹ His tendency to write repeating horn figures is also evident.

In 1948, the composer moved to Mexico, where he found more freedom to experiment with Latin jazz. The following year his group made its first recordings with RCA Víctor, which included his hit single “Que rico el mambo” (Pérez Firmat 1994:84). Characteristics of the Pérez Prado band include (1) a tendency to contrast extremely high trumpet lines against low, sustained pedal tones for the trombone; (2) having entire instrumental sections (the trumpets, the saxes) play unison lines against one another; (3) prominent use of the ride cymbal and cowbells throughout compositions; (4) the adoption of stylistic elements from jazz bands such as shakes, bends, glissandi, and (5) incorporation of the North American drum set. Acosta (1991:34) notes that Pérez Prado eventually developed two mambo styles, a slower mambo *caén* and the more typically rapid mambo *baitirí*. In later years, he recorded primarily non-mambo Latin standards that still incorporated many mambo elements.

Singer and songwriter Benny Moré (1919–63) was one of many musicians to perform with Pérez Prado and to incorporate elements of the mambo into the repertoire of Cuban dance bands. His biography is perhaps even more typical of popular musicians at the time. One of twenty children, Bartolomé Maximiliano Moré grew up in a poor black neighborhood named Guinea on the outskirts of San Isabel de las Lajas, near Cienfuegos. The town had been founded at the turn of the twentieth century by former slaves of the sugar plantation Caracas who were of Kongo origin; others arrived later of Yoruba ancestry (Díaz Ayala 1981:229). Leaving public school at age eleven in order to help support his family in agricultural work, Moré listened to a wide variety of music from an early age: *Regla de Palo* drum-

ming and dance in the Casino Congo de Lajas, *bembé* rhythms, rumba, *tambor makuta*, Spanish-derived *punto* and *décima*, Mexican *rancheras*, *sones*, and *boleros*, and U.S. popular music. As a teenager he taught himself to play the guitar and began performing in small groups near the Central Vertientes sugar plantation. In 1940, he moved to Havana and spent years in poverty, singing for tips on street corners and in cafés. In 1945, the Conjunto Matornos offered him his first professional contract, asking him along on a tour of Mexico. He accepted and stayed in the country for years afterward, singing with the ensemble Son Veracruz, in duet appearances with singer Lalo Montané (Orovio 1981:253) and in the big bands of Arturo Núñez and Rafael de la Paz. Shortly thereafter, Moré began rehearsing with the Pérez Prado orchestra, singing over sixty songs with them for the RCA Victor label. It was in Mexico that Moré made the first hit recordings of his own, notably “Bonito y sabroso” and “Pachito Eché” (Gurza 2003).

In 1950, Moré returned to Cuba and sang for a time in the orchestras of Bebo Valdés and Mariano Merceron. By 1953, he had formed his own group that in its various incarnations included musicians who later established themselves as prominent solo artists (Chocolate Armenteros, Rolando La Serie, Generoso “El Tojo” Jiménez). Unable to read music, Moré nevertheless became a competent composer, singing the phrases of his pieces to arrangers Eduardo Cabrera, Pedro “Peruchín” Justiz, and Generoso Jiménez; they in turn notated them and created the scores. Moré’s primary gift, however, lay in his ability as a vocal improviser. Recordings have captured some of his *sones* that demonstrate amazing melodic creativity. As in the case of Pérez Prado’s band, Moré worked essentially with Cuban jazz band instrumentation: numerous horns and a percussion section featuring drum set, congas, and bongo (Acosta 2002:42).

Music performed by the Moré orchestra is similar in some respects to that of the Pérez Prado band. It is less experimental, however, and includes more influences from traditional *son*. Many faster pieces are in binary form, with a strophic canto or verse followed by the cyclic *montuno* favored by Pérez Prado. Yet others, such as the famous “Mi sacoco,” are essentially identical to the mambo (Ex. 2). “Mi sacoco” is constructed of a repeating eight-measure phrase over a major I–IV–V–IV progression. The vocal line consists of a call–response dialogue in the refrain between the chorus, with Moré improvising the responses. Trumpets, saxes, and trombones each have distinct melodies that enter and layer upon the next when cued by the director. Conga drums play a typical *tumbao* rhythm, and the timbales a *cáscara*, or shell pattern, derived ultimately from the *rumba guaguancó*. The result is an open-ended ostinato of interlocked elements that serves perfectly as a

EXAMPLE 2. Representative ostinato in Benny Moré's "Mi sacoco," a mambo-influenced composition from the 1950s (*Gran Serie Benny Moré Vol. II*).

The musical score is arranged in seven staves. The top staff is for Bb Trumpets, followed by Trombone, Alto/Tenor Saxophones, Baritone Saxophone, Vocals, Piano, and Acoustic Bass. The key signature is one flat (Bb) and the time signature is common time (C). The vocal line includes the lyrics: "Ver - tien - te Ca - ma - güey, Flo - ri - da y Mo - rón Ay, mi - ra ne - gra me voy pa' Mo -". The piano part features a complex rhythmic ostinato pattern.

vehicle for spontaneous improvisation by vocal or instrumental soloists in the African tradition.

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Cuba in the 1950s remains difficult to comprehend in light of its many opposing representations and realities. Socially, the country was divided into a surprisingly large group of affluent urban professionals on the one hand and a mass of rural farmers and urban immigrants struggling to make ends meet on the other. It boasted one of the highest levels of per capita income in Latin America, yet the concentration of economic development in Havana as well as problems with discrimination deprived many of education, social services, and adequate employment. Politically the nation was in chaos, lorded over by dishonest presidents and military men. Fulgencio Batista is one example of the sort of opportunist who established control over the

—tradition.
[FIGURE]
[Example 2
about here]

island in the midcentury. Supported for years in Washington because he maintained a stable environment for investment, Batista proved to have a disastrous effect on Cuban politics in the long term. Especially after 1952, he demonstrated a flagrant disregard for democracy, maintaining control through acts of repression carried out against his own people using American-made weapons and with the help of American military advisors.

Musically, midcentury Cuba can only be described as extremely vibrant, creative, and influential. This small island nurtured countless artists who took the world by storm. Influences from African- and Spanish-derived folklore, light classical repertoire, and North American jazz fused in the midcentury into music at once familiar and engagingly “exotic” to Western listeners. Taking advantage of new opportunities available to them, members of the working classes secured employment in all areas of the expanding tourist-oriented economy. With more visitors than ever before, more money circulating on the island, and a population enamored of music, dance, and the pursuit of happiness, Havana became a mecca for nightlife.

Of course, fewer opportunities for artistic employment existed in the interior areas of the island relative to the cities. The mistreatment of rural workers had its corollary in a lack of interest in the music and dance they performed, at least in their traditional forms. Likewise, the overtly “African-sounding” music of the black working class met in many cases with the same discrimination as did the performers themselves. Many of the less appealing aspects of music making in 1950s Cuba—its flagrantly commercial nature, its orientation toward spectacle, its links to gambling—would be criticized by the new government in the years following Batista’s departure. Their attempts to redress such problems as well as the nationalization of the entertainment sector would fundamentally alter musical life.

The phenomenal vitality of Cuban music in the 1950s owes much to the increasing prominence of African-derived aesthetic elements and their fusion with Western musical forms in new, creative ways. Most performers in the midcentury were black or mulatto and grew up surrounded by folkloric repertoire that had a strong influence on their commercial compositions. Because of their involvement, genres such as the *danzón* eventually developed a final, open-ended vamp consisting of syncopated, interlocking rhythms and melodies. The emergence of the chachachá and the mambo can be explained as part of the same overall tendency involving movement away from strophic, sectional, European-derived music and toward cyclic, improvisational, African-derived forms. Music and dance constituted one facet of Cuban life in which racial barriers proved relatively easy to overcome. Cubans of color might not be accepted in many schools, private clubs, or the

professions, but in the field of entertainment they found an effective means of asserting themselves. Economic need provided the impetus for them to bridge the divide separating their neighborhoods from those of the middle classes and to create music appealing to everyone.

It is worth noting that some of the world's most captivating musical genres have appeared under deplorable social conditions. The tango first became popular in Argentine brothels as danced by pimps and *lunfas* in the slums surrounding Buenos Aires. North American jazz was first heard by many in New Orleans's Storeyville district, similarly infamous for prostitution, gambling, and crime. The fact that some of Cuba's best music shares aspects of these contradictory origins may be perplexing but is far from unique. Becoming a famous musician in 1950s Havana did not necessarily require formal education or even the ability to read and write, let alone access to health care and a pension. On the contrary, the precarious existence of many musicians and their lack of expertise in other fields functioned to make them pursue careers as entertainers even more insistently than they might have otherwise. In retrospect, their lack of formal training in music seems to have had certain benefits as well, helping them to conceive of, compose, and interpret songs in ways that had been overlooked by those schooled in Western traditions.

The two facets of the paradox of the 1950s—on the one hand its social and political problems and on the other its renowned artistic life—remained separate spheres through the middle of the decade, though some areas of intersection were evident. Mobsters such as Santo Trafficante Jr., in control of large hotels, promoted the careers of their favorite performers, as in the case of Rolando La Serie (Cirules 1999:20). The links between gangster-controlled tourist enterprises and payoffs to Batista's corrupt administration were also common knowledge. Yet for years the connections between cabarets and organized crime could still be overlooked by those who preferred to think of the former simply as a form of diversion.

As the decade progressed, patrons and even performers themselves began to note the effects of the unstable political environment on the arts. Carnival street celebrations were suspended in Havana for six years for reasons of security (Orejuela Martínez 2004:34). The numbers of tourists declined markedly in 1957 as sabotage and armed conflict escalated. Sentiment continued to shift more decisively against Batista, and government officials as a result censored public discourse more severely, including that of performers. Carlos Puebla, Ramón Veloz, and others claim to have been threatened by the secret police for singing songs of protest. Some artists left the country for a time in order to avoid the oppressive environment (*Bohemia*

51, no. 6 [February 8, 1959]: n.p.; archives, Cristóbal Díaz Ayala). Others joined clandestine resistance groups (the 26th of July movement, the Directorio Revolucionario) in an attempt to topple the government. Saxophonist Leonardo Acosta attests to having been part of these efforts, as was singer Manolo Fernández (Acosta, pers. comm.; Cristóbal Díaz Ayala, pers. comm.).²² Dance bands such as the Orquesta Sublime and Orquesta Aragón as well as conductors and composers—Juan Blanco, Carlos Faxas, Adolfo Guzmán, Nilo Rodríguez, Rafael Somavilla—played secret fundraising benefits for the revolutionary cause or composed music with revolutionary themes (Melquiades Fundora Dino, Leonardo Acosta, pers. comm.; Ardévol 1966:200). Work for dance bands became less frequent in the late 1950s, especially outdoor community events. Members of the resistance contacted *sociedades de recreo*, cabarets, and other institutions, urging them not to celebrate as tensions escalated (Orejuela Martínez 2004:35–38), though this appears to have been effective only in smaller venues.

Among the most chilling of insurrectional acts were those carried out in cabarets themselves. While infrequent, they received significant media attention and negatively affected all facets of entertainment. On October 28, 1956, for instance, members of the Directorio Revolucionario entered the cabaret Montmartre and killed colonel Blanco Rico, chief intelligence officer under Batista, as he attempted to leave the building (Cirules 1999:19). Colonel Marcelo Tabernilla, son of Batista's notoriously ruthless chief of staff, was also wounded along with his wife. The event forced club manager Mario García to close down for a time and to take his entertainers on tour in South America. On New Year's Eve in 1956, Javier Pazos and other members of the 26th of July movement set off bombs in the Tropicana, blowing off the arm of a seventeen-year-old girl, injuring the daughter of a former police chief and half a dozen dancers and causing other damage (Thomas 1971:910). The Havana Hilton delayed its opening several months in 1958 because of a similar event (Acosta 2002:67).

Perhaps the paradox of the 1950s is less difficult to explain than it might first appear. The musical impact of the period was due to the increasing affluence of the country overall, the emphasis placed on nightlife and tourist entertainment within the national economy, and the existence of a large middle class with money to support a diversity of leisure activities and of a larger underclass with musical talent. Batista's coup of 1952 and the resulting political crisis were unrelated events that did not negatively affect the country's entertainers. On the contrary, it appears that political instability, rather than suppressing performance, functioned to encourage it in certain respects. Music and dance remained more popular than before, serv-

ing as a refuge from social concerns. Whether in Havana or in areas far from the capital, military offensives against the revolutionaries rarely kept José Fajardo, the Orquesta Aragón, and Celia Cruz from animating guests (Rojas 1998:68). Friendly relations between Cuba and the United States continued to encourage the growth of tourism and investment through at least 1957, leading to new opportunities for performers. Batista's links with organized crime and the spread of gambling directly supported the arts as well. Every new hotel or casino represented an additional source of revenue for the state and mafia at the same time that it created stage space. The hedonistic world of the Tropicana, Salon Rojo, and Hotel Nacional flourished, at least in part, because they served such interests as well as those of popular musicians. Gaming that supported Havana's nightlife provided much of the revenue for their self-serving activities.