

FROM SON TO SALSA
The Roots and Fruits of Cuban Music

Ted Henken
Baruch College–CUNY

- MUSIC IN CUBA*. By Alejo Carpentier. Translated by Alan West-Durán. Edited with an introduction by Timothy Brennan. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. Pp. 302. \$67.50 cloth, \$22.50 paper.)
- CUBA AND ITS MUSIC: FROM THE FIRST DRUM TO THE MAMBO*. By Ned Sublette. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004. Pp. 688. \$36.00 cloth.)
- CUBANO BE, CUBANO BOP: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF JAZZ IN CUBA*. By Leonardo Acosta. Translated by Daniel S. Whitesell. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003. Pp. 320. \$29.95 cloth.)
- FACES OF SALSA: A SPOKEN HISTORY OF THE MUSIC*. By Leonardo Padura Fuentes. Translated by Stephen J. Clark. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003. Pp. 236. \$16.95 paper.)
- DANCING WITH CUBA: A MEMOIR OF THE REVOLUTION*. By Alma Guillermoprieto. Translated by Esther Allen. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004. Pp. 304. \$25.00 cloth, \$13.00 paper.)
- LAST DANCE IN HAVANA: THE FINAL DAYS OF FIDEL AND THE START OF THE NEW CUBAN REVOLUTION*. By Eugene Robinson. (New York: The Free Press, 2004. Pp. 288. \$25.00 cloth.)
- rites of RHYTHM: THE MUSIC OF CUBA*. By Jory Farr. (New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Pp. 272. \$25.95 cloth.)
- MUSIC IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA HISTORY. VOLUME I: PERFORMING BELIEFS: INDIGENOUS CULTURES OF SOUTH AMERICA, CENTRAL AMERICA, AND MEXICO*. Edited by Malena Kuss. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. Pp. 448. 2 CDs. \$60.00 cloth.)

When assessing the disproportionate global impact that the island of Cuba has had in areas as diverse as politics, literature, sports, and music and dance, the country is frequently and erroneously referred to as a “small island nation.” In fact, Cuba is large—far larger than any other single Caribbean island and roughly the same size (110,860 square km) as the rest of the Antilles combined. Given this fact, we should not

be surprised to find that while other islands have produced just one or two styles of “national music” (e.g., merengue and *bachata* in the Dominican Republic; *bomba*, *plena*, and *música jíbara* in Puerto Rico; reggae in Jamaica; calypso and *soca* in Trinidad), Cuba has developed and successfully exported a seemingly endless succession of musical styles and infectious rhythms, many of which have gone on to conquer the hemisphere and circle the globe: *son*, *rumba*, *contradanza*, *danza*, *danzón*, *habanera*, *punto guajiro*, *canción*, “rhumba,” *conga*, *mambo*, *cha-cha-chá*, *trova*, *bolero*, *filin* (feeling), *nueva trova*, Latin jazz, *descarga*, *batanga*, *pachanga*, *pilón*, *pacá*, *mozambique*, *songo*, *timba*, Cuban hip-hop, and of course, salsa itself, whose Cuban paternity is universally recognized by the mostly Nuyorican musicians who brought it into existence in New York City in the 1970s.

In different ways, most of the books under review here attempt to trace the origins and development of Cuban popular music during the twentieth century. These books also emphasize how Cuban music has successfully “crossed borders” to the rest of Latin America and the United States, reinventing itself many times and with different degrees of success along the way. All the authors are particularly concerned with uncovering the African elements that infuse popular Cuban music and dance, continuing a tradition of scholarly and popular curiosity begun most famously by Cuban anthropologist don Fernando Ortiz and taken up again most recently by ethnomusicologist Robin Moore in his pioneering study *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920–1940* (1997).

The first book under review is a new translation of *Music in Cuba* (2001), Alejo Carpentier’s landmark study of the historical development of Cuban sacred, symphonic, and popular music, and of the creative tension that has always existed among them. First published in 1945, before Carpentier wrote the works that made him one of Latin America’s leading novelists, this is the last of his major works to be translated into English. Editor Timothy Brennan reminds us that Carpentier was a professional exile, taking it upon himself to explain Europe to provincial Cuba and, increasingly, to convince Parisians why Cuban art and culture mattered. In this role, Carpentier had much in common with many other colonial expatriate intellectuals in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s: to search for ways of challenging the complacency of Creole bourgeoisie back home and to focus on and celebrate the unique elements of home-grown culture and art that could constitute a national culture.

This movement is what came to be known in Cuba as *afrocubanismo* and is the subject of the book’s fantastic final two chapters. Like the Harlem Renaissance in its celebration of black art and culture, *afrocubanismo* was more apt than its New York cousin to be led by white intellectuals, more politically radical, and more concerned with

the aforementioned project of building a national identity and culture independent of both Spain and the United States.

What distinguishes Carpentier from most other progressive white intellectuals of his time, however, was that he had made an all-important, life-altering, and artistically fertile trip to the “kingdom” of Haiti in 1943. Taking place just before his writing of *Music in Cuba*, this trip allowed him to understand Cuban culture, and indeed, all of Latin American culture in a new, deeper, and simultaneously more immediate way. This new understanding is reflected in the book’s basic thesis that, between 1920 and 1940, the entire vast history and innumerable genres of music in Cuba converged through the crystallization of son into a national musical style, producing a synthesis that for the first time posed an effective, brilliant musical resolution to the age-old tension between elite European salon music (such as the *contradanza* and *danzón*) and popular Afro-Cuban percussive styles (such as the *rumba*) emanating from the street.

Carpentier’s most original and provocative chapters are those like “Blacks in Cuba” (chapter 7) and “Cuban Bufos” (chapter 13), in which he dispenses with his often tiresome biographical sketches of Cuban composers and allows himself the liberty to make more open-ended reflections and analyses of Cuban musical *mestizaje*. For example, in his truly masterful analysis of the hybridity and originality of son as it emerged in the first years of the twentieth century, Carpentier describes how it broke off and became independent from the salon *danzón* due primarily to the fact that it was popular music played to the accompaniment of Afro-Cuban percussion with its unifying *clave*, not salon music played with a European-style orchestra.

It is curious, however, that Carpentier seems focused on the history of Cuban classical music at the expense of its popular counterpart, and he is often more concerned with the past (the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries) than the present (the twentieth century). For example, while he points out the innumerable ways black rhythms had become the defining element in the distinctive sound of Cuban music, he rarely if ever mentions any black (or white) popular *soneros* by name, preferring to profile a long succession of symphonic composers. Moreover, he comments only briefly on the tremendous ferment taking place in Cuban popular music just outside his window at the exact time he was writing his book. After all, the 1940s and 1950s were the peak years of the golden age of Cuban popular music, with the son, “*rumba*,” *conga*, *mambo*, and *cha-cha-chá* each successively taking the world by storm.

One other problem in reading this book in translation sixty years after it was first published in Cuba is that many of its observations and arguments have long since become common knowledge, especially among Latin Americanists. It is easy to forget that this knowledge was

not nearly so common in 1945, and that the fact that it has since become so is in large part due to Carpentier himself. Indeed, Brennan exaggerates only a bit when he calls the book “among the most plagiarized masterpieces of the New World Canon” (1), and as is evident in the books under review here by Sublette, Acosta, Padura, Robinson, and Farr, the influence of Carpentier’s initial historical analysis of Cuban music casts a shadow still felt by historians and musicologists today.

Just a few years before his death in 1980, Carpentier complained that his by then classic book on Cuban music needed a complete revision and expansion. In many ways, Ned Sublette has achieved exactly this in his encyclopedic, exhaustively researched, and thoroughly entertaining history, *Cuba and Its Music* (2004). Sublette, a musician, former coproducer of the public radio program *Afropop Worldwide*, and cofounder of the record label Qbadisc, stands on the shoulders of numerous Cuban researchers and musicologists. The list of his dutifully acknowledged forbears includes Cristóbal Díaz Ayala, Radamés Giro, Alejo Carpentier, Lydia Cabrera, Fernando Ortiz, María Teresa Linares, Argeliers León, Helio Orovio, Leonardo Acosta, Rogelio Martínez Furé, and Olavo Alén, whose primary research and Spanish-language publications inform nearly every line of the book. However, this turns out to be one of the book’s major accomplishments since so much of this work is unavailable in English.

True to its subtitle, “From the First Drums to the Mambo,” Sublette takes us on an engrossing journey that starts in Spain and Africa literally 2000 years “Before Cuba.” Here, we join the Phoenicians as they establish the classically colorful port city of Cádiz as a Roman crossroads of commerce, culture, and *libidinis arte* (lewd arts), presaging Havana’s later fame in exactly the same three areas. Always connected to these *libidinis arte* were the equally famed *puellae gaditanae* (lascivious singing and dancing girls from Cádiz) who played the percussive castanets as they danced and shook their booties down to the ground, literally: “*ad terram tremolo descendant clune puellæ*,” (8) according to the first-century Roman writer Juvenal, whom Sublette cites.

In one of his most deftly employed techniques used consistently throughout the book, Sublette makes the following inspired supposition (the kind of provocative synthesis that far too many professionally trained academics are either too reticent or unimaginative to make): the song-and-dance that so repulsed and attracted the Romans “might have been [. . .] informed by centuries of direct and indirect contact with black Africa, [whose] music was as rhythmic and as infectious then as it is now” (8). It is this kind of provocative theorizing, energetic wit, and careful attention to detail, complete with literally hundreds of fascinating and little-known linguistic, musical, ethnological, and historical anecdotes, that sustain the book as Sublette takes us step-by-step through more than five hundred years of Cuban history.

Early on, while still laying out the pre-history of the African Congo and its Bantu language, Sublette glosses the all-important word mambo by quoting “the most important single figure of Cuban music in the twentieth century” (442), Arsenio “el ciego maravilloso” Rodríguez. Rodríguez, to whom Sublette dedicates the better part of five later chapters, explains that in the Bantu dialect one singer might say to another, “*abre cuto güirí mambo,*” or, open your ear and listen to what I’m going to tell you (54). Such a declaration could easily stand as the epigraph to Sublette’s entire book, which includes detailed descriptions of fruitful and hugely influential artistic collaborations among Cuban musicians and between Cubans and North Americans. Some of the more noteworthy of these include Gottschalk and Espadero in the nineteenth century; Sindo Garay and Pepe Sánchez; María Teresa Vera, Lorenzo Hierrezuelo, and Compay Segundo; Caturla, Roldán, and Carpentier; Bola de Nieve, Rita Montaner, and Ernesto Lecuona; Dizzy Gillespie and Chano Pozo; Machito and Mario Bauzá; Antonio Arcaño and Cachao; Benny Moré and Pérez Prado; Celina González and Reutilio Domínguez; and Arsenio Rodríguez and Miguelito Valdés.

In his section on “Colonial Cuba,” Sublette vividly describes the motley mixing, carousing, and singing and dancing of “lascivious” Havana and the swaggering, “ghetto fabulousness” of colonial Cuba’s large free black population, known as *negros curros*. The all-important historical and musical connections between Cuba, Haiti (“the Atlantis of the Caribbean”), and New Orleans (“the fertile crescent”) get two full chapters here. Sublette also reminds readers that, “For two and a half centuries, Cuba was not a country so much as it was a port” (84), hinting at the musical importance of Havana’s shipyard that produced hard wooden pegs by the thousands for shipbuilding, which were quickly transformed by an anonymous stevedore into the clave, the *sine qua non* of son, and the “rhythmic key” to all Cuban dance music (95).

In his cleverly titled chapter “Buying Whites and Selling Blacks: A Contradanza,” Sublette nimbly combines the astute observations of an historian with the vital technical knowledge only a practicing musician can provide as he chronicles the deep corruption and greed among Spanish administrators that fueled the contraband trade in African slaves well into the 1860s. Simultaneously, Sublette reveals that the revenue of this trade in human cargo was used to fund a pharaonic construction drive led by Captain-General Miguel Tacón (1834–1838) that resulted, among many other municipal improvements, in the erection of the ornate theater at Prado and San Rafael that still bears his name, and where Cubans flocked to hear increasingly creolized contradanzas. Later, in his section on “Insurgent Cuba,” Sublette points out that it was in the enclosed *solares* (patios of housing tenements) of Havana’s and Matanzas’s humble port neighborhoods where the ship and dock

workers lived that Afro-Cuban religions were most intensively practiced and where authentic Afro-Cuban rumba was born at the end of the nineteenth century.

The third part of Sublette's book, "Afro-Cuba," is quite possibly the best synthesis and clearest explanation of the African origins and Creole development of Afro-Cuban religion and music available in English. Here Sublette sets the stage for what is the heart and soul of the book, his later discussion of how son absorbed influences from rumba and danzón (and other styles of Cuban popular music) between 1900 and 1920, growing into a phenomenon of worldwide cultural and economic importance between 1920 and 1950. Sublette achieves this by painstakingly describing what he considers the six essential African-derived religio-cultural groups that make Cuban music what it is: Congo (*palo*), Carabalí (*abakuá*), Yoruba (*lucumí/ocha/santería*) (each of which gets its own chapter), and to a lesser, more diffused extent, Dahomey (*arará*), the transplanted black culture of Haiti (*vodú*), and the legacy of the Spanish *negros curros*.

At one point along his journey, Sublette laments the fact that casual observers often misleadingly refer to son as the "Cuban blues" (161). However, to paraphrase one of his more counterintuitive theses: Cuban musicians don't get the blues, and American musicians can't feel the clave. Son is surely the root from which the fruit of salsa grew, just as the blues gave birth to rock-and-roll. However, Sublette argues quite convincingly that son and blues, while both "African" in parentage, are very different in their particular origin and internal structure. Due to the unique geographical and ethnic origins of the initial African populations in Cuba (southern indigenous forest Africa—the "Congo"), Cuban music developed a polyrhythm held together by the clave, giving it what John Storm Roberts and Jelly Roll Morton famously called the Spanish or "Latin tinge" (consistently evident over the last hundred years from son to salsa). On the other hand, the bulk of the initial U.S. slave population came from northern Islamized savannah Africa—the "Senegambia"—giving African-American music, from ragtime and jazz to blues, rock, and rap, a "beat" and "swing" largely lacking in Cuban music.

After going to so much trouble distinguishing between the origins of Afro-Cuban and African-American musical styles, Sublette fires off another equally provocative claim that like the first would seem exaggerated if he did not provide so many convincing examples to back it up: while the development of American popular music in the twentieth century is usually understood in terms of the drama of black and white, even the most astute observers have been blind to the five-hundred-pound gorilla (guerrilla?) standing in the kitchen—Cuba. The influence of Cuban music on American popular music from jazz to rock-and-roll constitutes "the other great tradition." Sublette leaves most of the tantalizing

details of this thesis for the promised second volume where he is sure to begin in 1952 with Benny Moré's Banda Gigante and Enrique Jorrín's cha-cha-chá, which are scarcely mentioned in this volume. Suffice it to say that Sublette has evidence that "Louie Louie," that quintessential 1950s rock-and-roll party tune, was based on an obscure Cuban cha-cha-chá! Unfortunately, we will have to wait for volume two to get the rest of the story, which follows the apex of the mambo craze, when Dámsao Pérez Prado, a relatively unknown and unappreciated mulatto from the musically fertile barrio of Simpson in Matanzas, conquered the world (but not Cuba) with his screeching and grunting "Mambo #5."

Cubano Be, Cubano Bop is a one-hundred-year history of jazz in Cuba penned by Leonardo Acosta, one of Cuba's leading ethnomusicologists. As readers, we benefit greatly from his more than thirty years of primary research into the origins of Cuban jazz and from the various earlier versions of this book that have appeared in Spanish. Indeed, in this case, the English edition is perhaps more complete and refined due to corrections, revisions, and new materials added with the collaboration of Smithsonian editor Raúl Fernández. Moreover, what makes the book especially valuable is Acosta's "double role as witness and humble participant" (xiii) in the history of Cuban jazz as a saxophonist active in Cuba for more than fifty years. Finally, Acosta's decision to dispense with much anecdotal and theoretical material, along with the fluent and accessible rendering of translator David S. Whitesell, leaves us with a valuable, detailed, and very readable documentary history of jazz in Cuba. However, given the sometimes bewildering historical detail contained in the text, Acosta might have considered eliminating at least some of the seemingly endless lists of jazz bands, instrumentations, and musicians.

In his brief but surprisingly comprehensive book, Acosta manages to include chapters on the first, all-important musical encounters between New Orleans and Cuba at the turn of the century, the Cuban jazz ensembles of the 1920s, the Cuban Big Bands of the 1930s, and the development and impact of bebop, feeling, and mambo in the 1940s. To this he adds detailed descriptions of the explosion of Afro-Cuban Jazz in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, Havana's incredible cabarets and nightlife during the 1950s, the impact of the revolution on Cuban jazz after 1959, and the slow rebirth and ultimate takeoff of Cuban jazz from the 1970s to the present. Acosta's coverage of this wide-ranging history includes literally hundreds of musicians and scores of bands. As such, he repeatedly argues that "history consists of much more than four or five big names" (131), rejecting the idea that any one musician is responsible for implanting, developing, or popularizing jazz in Cuba.

Throughout the book, Acosta does a fine job of placing Cuban jazz in its historical, political, and social context, something especially

important given the enormous changes the island nation has seen over the last hundred years. For example, he shows how the history of jazz in Cuba constantly intersects with political and economic conditions on the island, which flooded the island with American cultural influences between 1898 and 1958, caused “thirsty tourists” to flock to Havana to pay top dollar to drink (during prohibition) and to listen to “exotic” music (the 1940s and 1950s, and again in the 1990s), and alternately led some of Cuba’s best musicians to seek their fortunes abroad during politically repressive eras and economic crises (the 1920s, 1960s, and 1990s). Furthermore, from the very start of the book we discover that the racism in both Cuba and the United States had a decisive influence on the economic opportunities open to blacks (partly accounting for their overrepresentation in the ranks of Cuban musicians). Race also influenced which musicians traveled to which country, the music they played, the venues in which they played, the audiences for whom they played, and the traditions they drew from and influenced.

While he rejects the “only one idol” complex that celebrates a single musician at the expense of a diverse tradition, Acosta does highlight three bandleaders, whose groups he sees as having done the most to successfully integrate the two “musical languages” of American jazz (especially bebop) and Cuban popular (Afro-Cuban) music: Armando Romeu, Mario Bauzá, and Chucho Valdés. Among these three, Bauzá, the arranger, sax and trumpet player, and musical director for thirty-five years of New York’s premiere Latin Jazz group, Machito and his Afro-Cubans 1940–1975), stands out. According to Acosta, Bauzá was the only band leader at the time whose fusion of Afro-Cuban music and jazz was a “conscious and tenacious” (103) project embarked upon after almost a decade of immersion in the 1930s New York jazz scene as a member and sometimes arranger in “four of the great jazz bands of all time (Chick Webb, Don Redman, Fletcher Henderson, and Cab Calloway)” (100). In fact, Bauzá left Calloway’s band in 1940 to work with Dizzy Gillespie and Frank “Machito” Grillo with the expressed purpose of creating a fusion between the popular Afro-Cuban music he had grown up with in Cuba and the jazz he came to master in New York. However, Acosta laments the tragic fact that Bauzá never performed in Cuba after 1957 and that he remains practically unknown there even today.

“If salsa exists (and at least I’m sure it does), there’s a name without which one cannot even conceive of its existence. And that name is Johnny Pacheco . . .” (51). It is with this quirky, provocative declaration that one of Cuba’s leading contemporary novelists, Leonardo Padura Fuentes, begins the most revealing chapter of *Faces of Salsa*, his fascinating “oral history” of the music that we have come to call “salsa.” This book is essentially a collection of thirteen slightly edited interview

transcripts, with colorful commentary and deft analysis by the interviewer, Padura, a confessed salsaholic. Each of the thirteen chapters of Padura's compact book is filled with revelatory historical details, and given his novelist's talent for conveying a sense of place and a feel for the essential personality of each of his "characters," Padura makes readers feel as if they are seated beside him as he conducts each hard-won and long-sought interview. After an essential prologue that invokes the spirits of sonero superstars Bartolomé "El Beny" Moré and Puerto Rican Ismael "Maelo" Rivera, the book begins on the corner of Amsterdam Avenue and 106th Street (Duke Ellington Boulevard) in the Manhattan "office" (La Catedral, an old Irish pub with a Spanish name) of the then eighty-two year-old godfather of Latin Jazz: Mario Bauzá.

Bauzá, who died less than a year later in the summer of 1993, carefully chronicles the development of Cuban son in New York and its fusion in a "perfect marriage" (20) with African American jazz between 1930 and 1950. However, he almost chokes on his Budweiser (his seventh of the afternoon) when Padura, that impertinent "chico," dares to ask the maestro about "salsa." Bauzá retorts, "Do you want to interview me or poison my blood talking about that? Who said salsa exists? [. . .] Look, ask Tito Puente himself; he knows where all this started, and he'll tell you the same thing—that the only salsa he knows about is spaghetti sauce." After calming down a bit, however, Bauzá concedes that even if the word salsa was originally only "a way of identifying Cuban music here in New York" (23), the salsa phenomenon had the virtue of keeping Cuban music alive during a time when what was being produced on the island was neither disseminated abroad nor very good (the 1960s and 1970s).

In addition to Bauzá, Padura manages to track down a veritable hit parade of the leading *salseros*, *merengüeros*, ethnomusicologists, and promoters associated with the salsa phenomenon. Outside of New York City, where Padura also managed to interview Dominican great Johnny Pacheco, we are taken to such disparate locales as Cancún, Mexico; Asturias, Spain; Santo Domingo; and Havana (Padura's home) in search of such luminaries as Willie Colón, Johnny Ventura, Juan Formell, Rubén Blades, Israel "Cachao" López, Wilfrido Vargas, Papo Lucca, Adalberto Álvarez, Juan Luis Guerra, Nelson Rodríguez, and Radamés Giro. In showcasing this motley crew, Padura reveals a central characteristic of "salsa" both as a style of music and as an idea or attitude. He insists that, true to its culinary name, salsa is a musical hybrid given to improvisation, based on Cuban rhythms and played with an urban sensibility. In other words, and at the risk of oversimplification, salsa is Cuban music played by Puerto Ricans in New York City (notwithstanding important exceptions such as Panamanian Blades, Larry "el judío maravilloso" Harlow, and Dominican Pacheco).

Throughout his text, but especially in the prologue and indispensable, tantalizingly entitled conclusion, "Ten Reasons and Five Opinions to Believe (or Not) in the Existence of Salsa," Padura argues that salsa has always been about much more than mere entertainment. Instead, salsa has been an intentional project of authentic artistic and intellectual creation. Most evident in classic recordings like Colón and Blades's *Metiendo Mano* (1977) and *Siembra* (1978) (which were big hits even in Cuba), Padura concludes that "those who make salsa do so with a conscience" (11). Like its cousin hip-hop, born in the same years and in many of the same East Harlem and South Bronx barrios of New York City, Padura argues that salsa is the fruit of desperation and resistance, a kind of symbolic emblem of cultural pride for Latino New York. This element of salsa is probably clearest in tracks like Blades's "Plástico" and "Pedro Navaja" that not only feature characters who become lost amid the fleeting promises of money and power amid prostitution, robbery, and murder, but also make mocking musical references to *West Side Story* that intone, "I like to live in America." These and other similar songs in the salsa repertoire call on Latinos of many different national origins who are "presentes" in the big city to unite and proudly reclaim their common cultural heritage.

While Castro's 1961 words to Cuban intellectuals, "within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing," would seem to establish the parameters of the often precarious relationship between art and revolution in Cuba since 1959, each of the next three books reveals the dynamic complexity and creative tension that has always existed between Cuban artists and the revolution. In different ways, Guillermoprieto (*Dancing with Cuba*), Robinson (*Last Dance in Havana*), and Farr (*Rites of Rhythm*) (all non-Cuban visitors to the island) show us how Cuban artists, musicians, and dancers have engaged in a constant, often creative, and always resourceful negotiation with the revolutionary project, at times celebrating and supporting it, at other times abandoning and condemning it, and at still other times criticizing it from within for its failure to fully live up to its liberatory promise.

On the surface, Guillermoprieto's memoir is about the heady six months she spent in Cuba in the summer and fall of 1970 (she was just twenty at the time). The purpose of her visit was to teach modern dance in the style of her New York mentors Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and Twyla Tharp to pupils at the expansive, architecturally breathtaking, but miserably neglected National Art Schools (ENA) in Cubanacán, a western suburb of Havana. Blissfully ignorant about the political minefield into which she was stepping, Guillermoprieto innocently arrived unannounced at the Havana airport loaded down with a mishmash of luxury, counterrevolutionary items, including tins of Australian butter, boxes of Danish cookies, melting chocolate bars, a

cache of tapes of contraband rock-and-roll, and seventeen pairs of shoes. Guillermoprieto was shocked to find that no one was available to pick her up from the airport, apparently unaware that every able-bodied Cuban had either gone “to the Plaza with Fidel” to celebrate May Day, or was in the countryside taking part in Cuba’s massive mobilization to reach the magical if arbitrary goal of harvesting ten million tons of sugarcane in a single year.

We quickly discover, however, that the real focus of her riveting narrative is the personal and political crisis that the pivotal year of 1970 was, both for young, idealistic but woefully uninformed leftist artists and intellectuals like her and for the Cuban revolution itself. As a young, relatively privileged, and vaguely progressive aspiring dancer who grew up between Mexico City and New York, Guillermoprieto suddenly finds herself overwhelmed by the enormity and humorlessness of the entire revolutionary project. What’s more, as a person for whom dance is at the very center of the universe, she is deeply frustrated at being thrust into a world where art has become irrelevant and is considered a bourgeois waste of time, especially if it does not contribute directly to building socialism. For example, she is mystified to learn upon arriving at the dance school that her studio’s lack of mirrors is proudly justified by her stern, ultrarevolutionary expatriate boss, Elfrida Mahler, as an intentional rejection of vanity and bourgeois decadence.

Again and again in her memoir, Guillermoprieto captures the untenable position of many progressive Cuban artists and intellectuals during these trying times. She finds them torn apart by conflicting feelings of criticism toward the revolution’s many contradictions and shortcomings and guilt of utter unworthiness for not being satisfied with the revolution’s many accomplishments. This is the position of many of her closest Cuban friends (homosexuals all), who find themselves trapped between a deep belief in the rightness of the revolutionary cause and a growing awareness that because of their homosexuality (and their intellectual nonconformity), they will never be able to become the “new men” celebrated by the revolution.

The failure of the massive eighteen-month-long undertaking to harvest ten million tons of sugarcane caused a major shift—a taming and Soviet institutionalization of sorts—in Cuban socialism that, according to Guillermoprieto, had important implications for artists and intellectuals who were now more uncertain than ever of their proper role in a society in permanent crisis. Essentially, she comes to question the very possibility of creative freedom within a revolution constantly attacked from outside and perennially hobbled by economic underdevelopment from within. Cuban artists and intellectuals, starting with prize-winning poet Heberto Padilla who was arrested in March 1971, were reigned in as the revolution entered its darkest cultural period, known as the

quinquenio gris (the grey five years), when they were constantly reminded of Che's summary judgment: "The original sin of Cuban intellectuals is that they did not make the Revolution."

Guillermoprieto is no neophyte in the world of Latin American leftist politics, culture, and reportage. However, in comparison to her three other more straightforwardly journalistic books, *Dancing with Cuba* has a much more intimate feel. Indeed, she wrote the original text of her memoir in Spanish, her native language (vividly translated here by Esther Allen), in an attempt to more easily capture and recount her personal breakdown, deep political confusion, eventual conversion, and odd, phoenix-like rebirth. Her conversion, however, is not a simple one. Nor is she reborn at the end of her six months in Cuba as a true believer in "la causa." Instead, she comes out of her political and existential crisis convinced, on the one hand, of the absolute necessity for the Cuban revolution to exist. On the other hand, given what she had seen of the revolution's attitude toward artists and intellectuals, she leaves Cuba harboring a deep ambivalence over the ways in which it had begun to devour its children—especially those artists like her young pupils at ENA who did not fit neatly into the mold of Che's "new socialist man," or those intellectuals like her handful of homosexual friends who dared in good faith to exercise their independent judgment by questioning the methods behind the revolution's increasing madness.

On the surface, Robinson's *Last Dance in Havana* and Farr's *Rites of Rhythm* are surprisingly similar. Both writers made repeated visits to Cuba since the late 1990s and present us with books that recount the thriving music and dance scene in contemporary Cuba. Remarkably, both even begin their tales at the same "source," the rowdy, exclusively Cuban, and nearly all-black music and dance Mecca, La Tropical (not to be confused with the world-renowned, overpriced cabaret Tropicana, where tourists, hard currency, and Cuban cocktail kitsch reign). Both writers are also clearly concerned with going beyond simplistic headlines about lock-step state control over all music and facile soundbites about the glory of Buena Vista Social Club. Instead, they attempt to uncover the depth and many shades of meaning that music and dance have in the lives of everyday Cubans.

Each book pays special attention to Afro-Cuban culture, religion, folklore, and music and to the different ways that race is lived in today's Cuba. In doing this, thankfully neither author comes across as an apologist for the abuses committed by the revolution in the realm of culture. At the same time, both writers find clear evidence of the stunning accomplishments of the revolution in the realm of music education. Finally, though they say they know better, given the poverty, control, and constant frustration that are the daily bread for most Cubans today, both writers admit to having repeatedly felt something akin to envy

and awe as they witnessed the struggles and often beautiful, urgent, and vital creations of the Cuban people.

For example, Robinson is mesmerized by middle-aged, overweight, and half-drunk dancers engaged in the intricate weaves of *casino* at the Casa de la Música, stunned by the talent and professionalism of student violinists performing at his hotel, and awestruck by the creations of art students at the beautiful ruin of the National Art Schools. Farr too senses that the Cuban youth with whom he comes into contact have something precious deep inside that gives them a measure of peace and self-knowledge amid the chaos and struggle of their lives. They know who they are and are confident that a place of importance awaits them within their culture. His much different experience as an educator and storyteller in the United States leads him to conclude that this confidence is largely missing in American youth, who have found instead that "modern American life offers them no transcendent vision" (3).

While his point is well made, Farr could have given a bit more nuance to his description of Afro-Cuban youth as fearless and confident about the future. Fear, resentment, and hopelessness are constants in the lives of many of Cuba's young people today, even if it does not arise from the same sources as the often alienated youth of the United States. Furthermore, while it is true that Cuban youth do seem to be more comfortable and confident of their place within their culture than their American counterparts, they are much less confident about their place in the economic and political structure of their country.

Despite the similarities between Robinson and Farr's works, the relative quality, style, vitality, and depth of understanding of contemporary Cuba reflected in each is quite different. Robinson wastes no time drawing in his readers at the very beginning of his book with the engaging, wise, and provocative declaration: "The *music* of Cuba is the real news. Those who make the music are the real journalists, analysts, social commentators" (xi). He insists that to understand contemporary Cuba you have to meet the musicians and listen to their urgent, fabulous music and, of course, go out and dance. Thus, the music Cubans make and the many, many dances they do to survive become Robinson's dual paradigms to which he periodically returns throughout the book to explain and evaluate Cuban society in general. Such paradigms have the added benefit of exposing the reader from the start to the fundamental tension running through contemporary Cuban society, between official billboards that paternalistically declare "Vamos Bien" (everything's okay) and the much starker, urgent reality of constantly scrapping and scrambling to survive.

Essentially, Robinson's wide-ranging but tightly written book boils down to an analysis of the complex and contradictory ways that race, revolution, and popular music interact in what he would surely call

"late socialist Cuba." As for race, Robinson learns quickly from Juan de Marcos, Cuban music impresario extraordinaire of Buena Vista and Afro-Cuban All Star fame, that Cuban culture and especially its music is black at its core. "Get one thing straight, man," de Marcos demands. "Cuban music is Afro-Cuban music. There are no whites in Cuba. There are people who think they are white, but they are all African" (32).

For his part, Farr falls much further short of his stated goal of "writing a living history of music and folklore [. . .] with deep imaginative sympathy" (4). While his text certainly reflects a strong knowledge of and personal passion for Cuban music and folklore, and while he successfully shows a deep sympathy for his many, many interviewees (all across the island, as well as in both New York and Los Angeles), he is much less successful in organizing his knowledge, passion, and sympathy in an original, imaginative, engaging, or coherent way. Indeed, there seems to be no compelling agenda or focus to his book other than the telling of his own travels throughout the island and the sharing of sometimes compelling stories and anecdotes of the Cuban musicians he meets along the way. In fact, the book often reads like an only slightly edited travel journal. The book is also hobbled by nagging misspellings of a number of common Spanish terms, a few factual errors, and the confusing placement of many excellent photos out of sync with the text.

The final title under review is the first volume in an eclectic, comprehensive, four-volume encyclopedic history, *Music in Latin America and the Caribbean*, edited by Malena Kuss. This inaugural volume, *Performing Beliefs: Indigenous Cultures of South America, Central America, and Mexico*, begins with a masterfully provocative prologue by Kuss and includes fifteen original essays by twelve leading anthropologists and ethnomusicologists on the still-surviving, and in some cases thriving, musical worlds of the indigenous peoples of Latin America. Subsequent volumes in the series will focus on the Caribbean experience (volume 2); the musical and cultural intersections and transculturations among different countries, regions, and ethnic groups (volume 3); and the urban popular musics of the "new world" that flow out of these more than 500 years of diverse musical traditions (volume 4).

While Kuss makes clear that the project was motivated from the start by the desire to "eradicate essentialisms" about indigenous music and to "intentionally embrace the multiplicity of approaches and perspectives" (xix) that scholars from a wide range of disciplines bring to the study of music, the essays in this volume are tied together by the belief that indigenous music can be best understood as the dynamic performance of evolving beliefs. More than a mere collection of ethnomusicological research, Kuss and her colleagues in the ongoing project "The Universe of Music: A History" aim to "empower Latin Americans and Caribbeans to shape their own musical histories,

privileging their modes of representation and traditions of scholarship" (ix). As such, the entire four volumes in the series, more than two decades in the making, gather together 150 contributions by over a hundred prominent scholars from more than thirty-five countries and include more than thirty hours of recorded music.

As this volume is specifically focused on the musical universe of the indigenous peoples of Mexico, Central America, and South America, it gives particular emphasis to case studies of a handful of specific groups including the Wakuénai of Venezuela (Hill), the Kamayurá of Brazil (Menezes Bastos), the Aymara and Kechua of Peru (Turino), the Mapuche of Argentina (Robertson), the Mískito of Honduras and Nicaragua and the Kuna of Panama (Velásquez), and the Purhépecha of Michoacán, Mexico (Nava López). The volume also includes more general surveys of the indigenous musical panorama of Brazil (Travassos), Bolivia (Baumann), Chile (Grebe), and Argentina (Ruiz). The text is considerably strengthened by the addition of essential background essays on Mexico's indigenous cultural diversity (Alonso Bolaños), the preponderance and diversity of aerophones throughout the region (Olsen), and by a number of brief but vital essays by the former president of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Carol E. Robertson, including a general introduction to the volume, three thematic articles (on myth, fertility, and healing), and the text's epilogue.

Sure to be an essential reference and research guide for the next generation of ethnomusicologists, the text is filled with very useful ethnographic and ethnomusicological maps of various countries and regions of Latin America, collections of musical notation, lyrics, and rare photos of indigenous musical performances, detailed drawings and photographs of scores of musical instruments, selections from codices, and numerous morphological diagrams that trace the complex evolution of various styles of music within a variety of indigenous groups. Finally, many of the text's essays end with detailed bibliographies, discographies, illustrated appendices, and lists of tracks linked to the final "Recorded Examples" section of the encyclopedia (including two CDs).

The seven books about Cuban music and dance under review here cover quite a wide range of topics and historical epochs, from Sublette's dancing girls of Cádiz in prehistory, to Carpentier's discovery of Estaban Salas's compositions in the basement vault of Santiago's cathedral, to the "invention" of Afro-Cuban jazz by Mario Bauzá and Machito in 1943 in New York City, to the car-horn shrieks of Willie Colón's trumpet in *El Barrio* signaling the birth of salsa in the 1970s, to Guillermprieto's amazement that polyrhythmic Afro-Cuban drummers find it impossible to beat out a "simple" waltz tempo, to the confrontational musical question posed by a young black hip-hop group in Havana in the late 1990s, "¿Quién tiró la tiza?" (Who threw the chalk?).

The new translation of Carpentier's *Music in Cuba* is important if for no other reason than making widely accessible one of the first attempts to trace the historical development and ultimate synthesis of Cuban sacred, symphonic, and popular music into the transculturalized hybrid son, which itself went on to conquer the world in the new urbanized fusion salsa. Likewise, this English translation of Acosta's history of jazz in Cuba will be a valuable title for Cuban music enthusiasts and Anglophone jazz aficionados alike, who have up to now been unaware of or unable to confirm precisely how these two musical genres have constantly intersected and influenced one another for more than a century. However, most nonspecialists will want to avoid Carpentier's sometimes tedious descriptions of somewhat obscure Cuban composers and Acosta's encyclopedic listings of Cuban jazz bands, arrangements, and musicians. Such readers will benefit much more from Padura's concise, engaging, and vital oral history of the insuppressible musical crossbreed orphan, salsa.

However, in terms of sheer reading pleasure, comprehensive coverage, provocative and original argumentation, and clarity of exposition, it would be hard to do better (for beginners and experts alike) than Sublette's *Cuba and Its Music*. Essentially, Sublette does for Cuban music what Jared Diamond did for evolutionary biology in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. He makes a complex and vast history accessible and endlessly fascinating for the nonspecialist aficionado. Also, like Diamond's book, Sublette's history of Cuban music should not be seen as a narrow monograph, in this case on one "interesting" but "limited" aspect of Cuban culture. Instead, given the fact that music is perhaps as central to Cuban identity as, say, warfare and human sacrifice were to the Aztecs, this book should be seen as an important work in Cuban socio-cultural history and as ambitious in its goals and successful in its accomplishments as Ortiz's *Cuban Counterpoint*, Moreno Fraginals's *The Sugarmill*, or Thomas's *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*.

While readers can eagerly await Sublette's follow-up volume on Cuban music since 1952, the titles by Guillermoprieto, Robinson, and Farr (as well as the later sections of Acosta's book) give us a rich description of the dauntingly complex but endlessly fascinating world of music, art, and culture during the last forty-five years under the revolution.