Talking timba: 
On the politics of black popular music 
in and around Cuba

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ABSTRACT
This paper discusses the case of Cuban timba, the most distinctive popular style to emerge from Cuba during the 1990s, which presented itself as emphatically escapist, but became intensely political in the way it reflected the changes of Cuba during the período especial (the economic crisis that followed the disintegration of USSR), eventually falling victim to Cuban censorship. The paper analyses Cuban discourses regarding popular music and Afro-Cuban music, and discusses if and how timba could be considered as a type a “political music”. It highlights how the politics of timba were mostly articulated by signs embodied in its sounds and dance style, but did not conform to Western ideas of “world music”. In the late 1990s, in fact, on the international arena “Cuban music” came to be identified with the reassuring message of Buena Vista Social Club. The paper then examines the role of timba in today’s Cuba.

KEYWORDS: timba; Afro-Cuban music; black identity; Cuba.

INTRODUCTION
When compared to the position of music in capitalist societies, music in Cuba seems to live in a different, isolated world. Cuban popular music, however, is not immune from the trends and tensions that criss-cross the globe, nor, despite the romantic imageries circulating on the international arena, is untouched by the political and social challenges that Cuba has been facing during the last two decades.
At the close of the 1990s I did extensive research on timba, a style of Afro-Cuban urban dance music emerged at the beginning of the decade. In this article I would like to examine some issues that have troubled me after the end of my research and during the writing of my book on timba (Perna 2005). These relate to difficulties involved in discussing Cuban music both in and out of Cuba and connected to its international representation. Those difficulties, I believe, are ultimately related to conflicting ways of reading the meaning and the politics of contemporary Cuban popular music.

After contextualizing timba, I will look at the discourse on Cuban popular music and dance music in Cuba. I will then examine different ways of reading the meaning of timba in relation to its specific organisation of sound, take a look at its international representation, and, finally, consider the relevance of timba today. Although I will not give an analytical description of the style, I will provide some general information on timba and make reference to specific songs, which can give a taste of its sound to those who are not familiar with it. One of the first samples I would like to present is “Tema Introducción” from the album *El charanguero mayor* by La Charanga Habanera (Karlyor 2000), who are today the most popular and spectacular timba band.

**TIMBA AS THE SOUND OF THE PERÍODO ESPECIAL**

The emergence and popularity of timba in Cuba coincided almost exactly with the advent and peak of the *período especial*. “Special period in time of peace” was the euphemistic name given by Fidel Castro to the abysmal economic crisis that hit the island at the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1991, Cubans witnessed a quick decline of their living standards, and started to experience food shortages, long power blackouts, lack of transportation, and all sorts of hardships (more or less, still in place today). Desperate for hard currency, the Cuban government decided to reconvert its economy to tourism. Opening to investment from the West, new hotels and nightclubs were hastily built in Havana and Varadero, the island’s most famous beach. Europeans and North Americans started to flock to Havana, bringing with them much-needed dollars.

The 1990s tourists’ *dolce vita* rocked to the sound of a new type of music, alternatively called *música bailable* (“dance music”), *salsa cubana*, or, more specifically, timba. Its creation was largely credited to Afro-Cuban composer José Luís Cortés, the leader of NG La Banda. In the early 1990s, he put together a sort of avant-garde dance music, which combined dance forms and mass appeal with jazz aesthetics and an extremely high performance standard (many of NG’s members, in fact, came from jazz-fusion supergroup Irakere). His songs carried references to Afro-Cuban musical forms, and employed black slang to tell stories about everyday life in the barrios (black neighbourhoods). At a time of dramatic transformations – with the beginning of *período especial* and the drastic downsizing of socialist welfare state – NG’s music seemed able to convey instances of hope and social change.
As a musical style, timba markedly contrasted with the sounds previously exported by socialist Cuba. Before the 1990s, Cuban music abroad had been mainly represented by politically-engaged singer-songwriters of the *nueva trova* like Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés, by music-and-dance shows such as Tropicana-style extravaganzas or the performances of the Conjunto Folclórico Nacional, and by few selected bands playing jazz and popular music, such as Irakere and Los Van Van. Around the mid-1990s, timba had been adopted by virtually all the most important bands. It received a preferential treatment by state-controlled contracting agencies, dominated Cuban radio stations, and could be heard in every tourist club. Cuban dance bands made extensive tours abroad, signed contracts with international record companies, and earned substantial amounts of dollars.

As it gained followers among foreign visitors, timba became also increasingly contentious. One of the reasons for this was the daring content of some songs, which commented on marginal characters, racism and sex tourism, and were often seen as veiled – or not-so-veiled – criticisms to the Cuban government. Around 1996, state-controlled press started to attack *música bailable* – that is timba – stigmatizing its relationship with the tourist industry, and particularly with the informal economy flourishing around tourist nightspots and the so-called “dollarization” of Cuban society. To the eyes of the Cuban authorities, those (state-run) places acted as magnets for illegal activities such as black marketeering and prostitution, and provided a focal point for a youth subculture alien to the revolution. Instead of aspiring to a life of work, self-sacrifice, and solidarity, impoverished Cuban youngsters appeared mesmerized by visions of pleasure, fashionable clothing, and material plenty, and crammed dollar-only tourist clubs seeking to “make friend” with foreigners. In the view of institutional commentators, timba and its musicians seemed to incite the youth to embrace capitalistic values: down with dialectic materialism, and long life to consumer culture!

The hide-and-seek game between *timberos* and the Cuban establishment came abruptly to a halt in 1997. In August that year, the authorities banned La Charanga Habanera from broadcasting, performing, and travelling abroad for six months. That action coincided with a police crackdown on prostitution, the closure of several dance clubs, a wave of tighter controls on the informal economy, and a more general restriction of civil liberties. Such authoritarian drift was probably at the root of the split of various timba bands, and, between 2001 and 2003, of the defection to the US of two of the most popular singers, Manolín aka *el Médico de la Salsa* (“the doctor of salsa”) and Carlos Manuel Pruneda.

1997, however, marked also the launch of *Buena Vista Social Club*, a foreign-produced album and film that would eventually become a global hit, and almost completely re-define the international image of Cuban music. At the beginning of the new millennium, and thanks to *Buena Vista Social Club*, on the global arena Cuba became the island of elderly musicians and retro sounds. That happened in the context of a tightening of US commercial embargo on Cuba, which – in practice if not in theory – penalized far more Cuban commercial music than supposedly traditional styles.
All those factors made a deep impact on timba, and, according to some people, pronounced its death (I will come later to this). In the following sections, I would like to examine how, at home and abroad, the meaning of timba came to be read in two radically diverging ways. At home, the press and the cultural establishment read and criticized timba in the narrowest political sense, that is, by looking at its lyrics and searching for “anti-Cuban” (that is, anti-government) content. Out of Cuba, the same music was instead perceived as quintessential dance music, namely, as a type of overtly entertaining, commercial music that tended to escape given notions of political meaningfulness.

CUBAN DISCOURSES ON CUBAN MUSIC

I will now look briefly at some difficulties related to the positioning of popular music in Cuba, by examining the role of dance music, its relation to Afro-Cuban culture, and its perceived meaning (or lack of it).

After 1959, in Cuba the institutional perception of popular music remained unclear, and even ambiguous. Despite its obvious prominence in people’s tastes, during the early decades of the revolution, popular music was perceived by the Cuban political and cultural establishment largely as an entertainment for the masses, with no ideological content and use (with the exception of nueva trova). So, while the Cuban state invested a considerable amount of resources on music education and material facilities for cultural production, providing musicians with work, a salary, and a retirement pension, for decades popular music remained out of the curricula of the new high-level music schools, was subject to little academic investigation, and was mentioned only cursorily in official documents.

Another problem lies in the fact that a considerable part of Cuban popular music (and certainly of Cuban music as it is known in the West) is made for dancing and is essentially Afro-Cuban music. This has not always been acknowledged by Cuban musicologists. A quick examination of post-1959 Cuban literature, for example, shows how the use of the qualifier “Afro-Cuban” was essentially limited to expressions bearing visible, explicit African traces: “Afro-Cuban music” included the ritual music of black religions such as santería, palo monte, and abakuá, but not expressions with patently black matrixes and audiences such as rumba and música bailable. Such a curious angle – at least, from a non-Cuban perspective – arguably relates to policies that, after the revolution, sought to promote the construction of a new society and a unified Cuban culture, but that, in doing so, downplayed the contribution of the culture of black Cubans to contemporary popular culture. Such a backward-looking image of Afro-Cuban culture, therefore, exposed it to the risk of folklorization, and sometimes even justified its repression (Vélez 2000).

The problem with the definition of the role of black popular music in Cuban society, in a way, has become all the more pressing during the período especial, for at least two related reasons. Firstly, because the economic crisis has coincided with a powerful re-emergence of Afro-Cuban culture, visible not just in music, but also in religion, dance, visual arts, literature, and cinema. And secondly, because the
criterion has generated new social inequalities that have particularly affected the black sector of the population (De la Fuente 2001). The combination of those factors has made the issue of the discussion on the role of blacks and their culture in Cuba at the same time urgent and extremely sensitive.

Aside from the pitfalls of cultural institutions and Cuban musicology, another difficulty is represented by the fact that in Cuba both musicians and ordinary people are generally reluctant to enter discussions on issues that might appear in any way as “political”. Since this qualifier applies to issues related to official ideology, the government, and the Communist Party, most popular musicians indeed carefully avoid discussions on anything that might be labelled as such. Rather, they would often claim that all they are doing is simply offering a form of entertainment to their audiences. Such explanation is apparently confirmed by a Western scholar, who in 1990 wrote that “much of the music that Cubans listen and dance to today has no connection at all with the revolutionary message”. He continued:

It is evident that the revolutionary leaders are very far from turning popular music to maximum advantage as a medium for transmitting the revolutionary message. Consequently, this highly important realm of Cuban popular culture still remains, for most part, immune to the monolithic politicisation process.  

(Medin 1990)

This, certainly, holds true if we look at the overall lyrical content and use of Cuban popular music. And yet, the very fact that música bailable has largely escaped the politicisation process and avoided getting enmeshed in official propaganda, might be read in an exquisitely political fashion. For example, as a testimony of the importance and power of música bailable in Cuba, and of the ability of dance bands to retain control of their music and activity, by carving themselves a niche where they have been able to remain relatively immune from institutional interference. This has enabled their music to stay clear of official ideology and close to the street, thus endorsing a vision of popular culture “from below”, in contrast with the past-oriented representations of Afro-Cuban culture offered by academics and folkloric ensembles. From this point of view, clearly, even the unashamedly hedonistic image of Cuban dance music may be read as a challenge to the perceived pretentiousness of the official political language.

POLITICAL VS. POPULAR? THE ELUSIVE MEANINGS OF TIMBA

A question that underlies any discussion on Cuban popular music – and indeed, on Cuban cultural identity – is: which music is popular in Cuba? Here the meaning of “popular” appears both important and contentious. Cubans listen to a great deal of music, both national and foreign, and there is no doubt that styles as diverse as son, nueva trova, rock, rap, and reggaeton (or reguetón) today all represent legitimate brands of Cuban music. However, one also needs to question how much those styles are, literally, popular. In the absence of statistics, both empirical evidence
and the general opinion suggest that música bailable, and timba as a subcategory of it, occupy a central place in the musical consumption of Cubans, and especially black Cubans.

If música bailable is so important, what is then its significance? Is it meaningful, or, as musicians themselves often seem to suggest, it is just a type of escapist music? Música bailable has frequently been portrayed as a kind of “tropical music” that embodies Cubans’ exuberant, sensual, and festive nature. Already a major element in the representation of Cuban music of the past, such an image has been copiously exploited during the 1990s by state agencies that promoted Cuban music abroad, with an obvious eye to the marketing of tourism. Cuban travel brochures and CD sleeves, in fact, abound of images of palms, beaches, African drums, and female hips.

On the other hand, both the advocates (for example, Acosta 1997) and the detractors of timba (for example, Tabares 1996) have read it as a socially relevant – and therefore loosely political – musical form, albeit to substantiate opposite views. Whether timberos actually intended to make political statements through their songs, is open to speculation. But música bailable, and particularly timba, have often taken upon their shoulders the role of Caribbean popular song as a form of social chronicle. And since “some of the strongest claims for the political importance of popular music have been made by its greatest enemies” (Street 2001), one might reasonably argue that the fact that timba has been vehemently attacked by the Cuban press and censored by institutional entities made it into an eminently political expression.

However, what strikes me is that most of the arguments made in Cuba, both in favour and against timba, were focused on songs’ lyrics (Casanellas Cué 1999). This recalls the argument usually employed in the West to celebrate the virtues of “political music”, that is its textual politics. According to the Centre for Political Song established at the Caledonian University in Glasgow, for example, a “political song” is a song containing a political thread. The genre includes, for example, protest songs, campaign songs, songs providing a social commentary or supporting a historical narrative, songs of the Labour movement, traditional patriotic songs and political parodies. (Centre for Political Song n.d.)

Could timba be read as a form of political song according to those modalities? I very much doubt it. Even though timba songs surely had a social resonance in Cuba, they were highly unlikely to be seen as conveying explicit political messages or expressing some form of protest. And even when they did appear to articulate some sort of social commentary, at a closer analysis they revealed lyrics that showed a great deal of ambiguity.

Neither did the public image and attitude projected by timba bands and artists, who showed nothing of the intellectual or militant approach of engaged singer-songwriters or of the rebellious stance of protest rockers, appear “political” – in the
sense generally held in the West. Rather, their image looked closer to that of Latin American dance music outfits such as salsa bands, with slick music-and-dance shows, fronted by sexy male singers attracting a predominantly female adoring crowd. That was hardly the type of image, attitude and audience considered typical of political song. My argument here is that an explanation of the politics of timba standing solely on its verbal message did not tell the whole truth, and probably missed the point.

TIMBA’S POLITICS OF SOUNDS

I will now discuss how, I believe, timba managed to be political in another, deeper sense. The point I want to make here is that the main political dimension of timba was to be found not in its lyrical content, but in the way it articulated Cuban black popular culture by means of a variety of signs.

This is not to say that lyrical content was irrelevant. Songs, indeed, sometimes did comment on controversial issues or Afro-Cuban culture and life in the barrio. But they also hinted at the life of black Cubans through the usage of language and slang, for example by employing words taken from Afro-Cuban languages, or borrowed from black youth’s street slang terms (for example, temba, fula, Yuma, bisne, wani-kiki, chen, respectively, “middle-aged man”, “dollar”, “US”, “business”, “money”, “exchange”). The fact that those words often derive from American English, tells a great deal about the cultural landscape of timba subculture.

Then there was what might be called an indexical use of music. Since everybody in Cuba knows that blacks are the most dedicated followers of dance music, música bailable has become itself an indicator of black popular culture, and of its power. And the fact that timba bands and audiences are overwhelmingly black, in turn, confirms the “blackness” of the music.

More specifically, the reference to Afro-Cuban culture was encoded into timba’s music and sound. Instrumentation, for example, included prominently drums and Afro-Cuban percussions. Then you had songs’ musical form, which derived from the bi-partite structure found in son and rumba, with a first melodic, narrative part, followed by a second, call-and-response section. The first part was sung by a solo singer and resembled a song or ballad, while the second one contained alternations of coros (choral refrains) and guías (semi-improvised responses by a singer). Needless to say, this second section was, and is, the most lively and catchy part of songs, the most awaited for by dancers, and the one that usually contains the sauciest expressions.

Timba showed also a particularly “black” way of building its musical texture and accompaniment, different from the average rock or pop song. As in salsa, the accompaniment in timba was produced through the overlaying of a series of percussive, harmonic and melodic ostinatos, which followed a construction principle found in West African music. The intertwining of syncopated arpeggios, displaced accents, melodic fragments, and rhythmic ostinatos, produced timba’s typically shifting and driving texture.
Timba songs, then, conveyed references to black culture via the quotation of Afro-Cuban melodies and rhythms. For example, of religious chants pertaining to the domain of santería, the most important African-derived religion in Cuba, or of rhythms related to specific santería deities. You’ll find one example of a devotional chant placed at the beginning of “Y que tu quieres que te den?”, by Adalberto Alvarez y su Son, from their eponymous album (Artcolor 1993). In the early 1990s that song, which was stylistically midway between son and timba, launched a fad of dance songs that made explicit references to Afro-Cuban religions.

Other times, songs made reference to black secular forms such as rumba, a voice-and-percussion, music and dance typical of lower-class barrios, that holds a paramount musical and symbolic role in black Cuban popular culture. Those references could be found in many songs by NG La Banda. In “El Trágico” (“the tragic guy”), from the album Cabaret estelar, aka Échale Limón (Caribe 1995), J. L Cortés and NG La Banda open the introduction with a rumba, then superimposing the beginning of Grieg’s Piano concerto in A minor, op. 16, producing a sort of tragicomic effect.

In NG La Banda’s “Los sitios entero”, from the album No se puede tapar el sol (Egrem 1990), a literal quotation of rumba makes up the entire central section of the song. Such contrasting part is placed between the first and third “electric” sections of the song, where one can appreciate the virtuoso playing of NG’s horn section. Very often, however, dance songs refer to rumba quasi-subliminally, through the simple use of the rumba clave, a little ostinato played by woodsticks throughout the song. Rumba was also an important root of timba’s dancing style. Although I do not have here space to expand on the subject, it is relevant to note how such ubiquitous presence of rumba in timba has led Cuban commentators such as Helio Orovio to dub this style as the “resurrection of rumba” in a modern context.

As I said, during the 1990s dance music has played in Cuba an important role in the process of re-emergence of lower-class black cultural expression, an aspect of Cuban culture that was supposed to have been swept away by the progressive social reforms and cultural developments of the revolution. Take, for example, African-derived religions. Often strongly resisted by the government during the 1960s and 1970s, they powerfully re-emerged during the 1990s to become enormously popular, to the point of featuring prominently in several successful dance songs. Rather than making a mystery of their affiliation to santería, in the 1990s popular musicians exhibited and celebrated their bonds with Afro-Cuban religion through their songs and their visual style.

Contrary to the ideology of naiveté and primitivism that underlies tropical representations of Caribbean music, however, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the association of timba with black cultural expression is not by any means “natural”. Whatever their claims might be, timberos have constructed their music through an extremely conscious aesthetical and ideological bricolage of musical/cultural elements of Cuban, Caribbean, and US origin. Timba musicians have used those elements to build up their audience, and sometimes to challenge the authorities while trying not to incur censorship. In such a context, music became important not only for what it said, but also for what it was seen to represent to both local and foreign
audiences, that is, a symbol of black pride and a testimony of the resilience of Afro-Cuban popular culture.

Discourses on Cuban music on the international stage

While often undervalued (or positively disliked) by the cultural establishment in Cuba, música bailable has also been frequently misrepresented abroad, where different pictures of Cuban popular music have often been conflated into an image of otherness, exoticism, and disengagement.

One common representation is that of Caribbean music as tropical music that I have mentioned earlier, which has contributed to dump Cuban música bailable into the same bin with salsa, merengue, and bachata. Although such labelling may appeal to people who are into Latin dancing and, more in general, to many Latin Americans, it puts timba into a cultural zone seen by many listeners (notably, rock and world music fans) as cheap and tacky. Such misunderstanding, which presupposes a binary view that thinks it impossible for music to conjugate entertainment and social meaningfulness, has frequently emerged from articles that extol the virtues of timba:

What is Timba? Let’s quote. ‘Timba is the real, vibrant contemporary music of Cuba. Energetic and uplifting, timba embraces jazz, reggae, pop, funk, rap, samba, son as well as salsa, but it is more percussive than salsa, with a stronger bassline, building up to a […] climax – and is very danceable!’ It’s uplifting all right. […] It’s just – fun, more than anything. (Ohmart 2001)

The other image of Cuban music that has gained momentum since 1999 has been the one generated by the album and the film Buena Vista Social Club. That is an image of difference and distance articulated on many levels – physical, cultural, and temporal – which took the form of a picture of a city of architectural grandeur and decay, of cigar-smoking octogenarians, of old-fashioned melodies and sounds. The rise of Buena Vista Social Club has thus redirected the attention of global audiences towards narratives of authenticity, promoting a brand of essentialised “traditional music” that was nothing but a form of tourist art, that is, a type of art produced by locals on the basis of the aesthetic expectations of the international market.

Conclusion

Is timba dead, then? After its heyday in the mid-1990s, timba has seen the global success of Buena Vista Social Club, the rise of Cuban rap, and then the explosion of reguetón. This has led some observers to assert that timba was dead and buried. According to one Cuban article, for example, “as a commercial product, timba was a chimera: as a music and a form of dancing, it represented one of the most hallucinating moments of the 20th century” (García Meralla 2004).
By suggesting that timba was an episode related to the particular context of Cuba in the 1990s – that is, to the lowest point of the economic crisis of *período especial* – Cuban critics arguably wished to shelf timba as an ephemeral phenomenon, evading its difficult cultural and political questions. In a similar fashion, a foreign commentator wrote:

By the end of the decade, [...] the timba scene was in steep decline: labels bankrupt – bands censured, clubs closed and some of the music’s stars in exile. In 1999, the National Folkloric Ensemble of Cuba included the *tembleque* in its repertoire – its performance invariably causing respectable theater audiences to break into laughter. The tremor of timba was now carefully choreographed by a professional troupe, and the social history of Afro-Cuban performance repeated itself in this trajectory from marginal *chabacanería* (‘crassness’) to folkloric spectacle. (Hernández-Reguant 2004)

Undeniably, during the 2000s, timba has lost much of its novelty value, first in favour of nostalgic *soneros*, then of socially-engaged *raperos*, and finally of *reguetóneros*. In my view, however, it is not dead at all. As we start to historicize it, rather, we must look at it as one part of much older and wider threads. Firstly, we would need to examine timba as part the thread of Cuban *música bailable*, which, from the mid-19th century *habanera* on, has drawn on black popular culture, entertained Cubans of all classes and colours, and attracted the wrath of philistines. From this point of view, even carefree *reguetón*, which in the last few years has met a phenomenal success with black Cuban teenagers, appears to stem from the same type of Afro-Caribbean culture and presents many parallels with both rumba and timba. For example, in the use of black slang, of reiterative refrains, of a provoking dance style, and of its ability to solicit moral condemnation by the establishment2.

And secondly, timba has been a testimony of, and an actor in, the process of reassertion of Afro-Cuban popular culture that has emerged with the *período especial*, and has helped to draw black popular expression from the margins towards the centre of the Cuban cultural scene. Such process, which shows parallels with similar phenomena visible elsewhere in Latin America, has fed a growing consciousness about the cultural and political feats and dilemmas faced by black people in Cuba.

This complex picture of timba, obviously, is in striking contrast with both the escapist image of Caribbean dance music, and the simplistic, unproblematic representations of traditions constructed by *Buena Vista*. This latter case, I think, has been particularly worrying, because of the persuasive force of its discourses of authenticity, which claimed to defend musical diversity from the assaults of global popular culture – while in fact showing the conservative implications of the narratives of difference that inform world music and surround the boom of ethnic travel, fashion, and food.

In a way, the difficulties and contradictions of Cuban popular music in the West have been unwillingly summed up by Ry Cooder, the man who masterminded the success of *Buena Vista Social Club*:
Salsa is boring but there are kids out there doing something good. It’s never going to be this classic stuff we love but that has been disappearing all over the world. These old guys are going to disappear in a New York minute and we can’t sit around moping about it. The sun is setting on these people. (Williamson 1999)

In the face of such anachronistic longing for near-extinct sounds (which helped to sell 8 million copies of the CD) and of the present popularity of reguetón in Cuba, I argue that up to this day música bailable and timba remain on the island the main recreational music of black adults. If you pay a visit on Saturday nights to La Tropical, the open-air arena that represents the academy of black music and dance in Havana, you’re not likely to see young rockers, elderly soneros, or fashionable rappers. In places like those, and at open-air concerts, música bailable continues to reign supreme.

For this reason, I would like to end my paper on a musical note, with one more song by La Charanga Habanera. In 2001, they recorded in their album Chan Chan… Charanga! a soulful dance version of “Chan Chan” – thus providing a pointed musical response to Cooder’s sentimentalism and a powerful testimony to timba’s adventurous spirit.

ENDNOTES
1. This paper was first presented at IASPM 13th Biennial Conference Making music, making meaning, Rome, 24-30 July 2005.
2. Interestingly, after targeting timba in the late 1990s, polemics on the social appropriateness of the lyrics of popular music in Cuba have hit reguetón (Castro Medel 2005).

REFERENCES


