

HAVANA MOON

Discovering Cuba's African Heritage

By RON SAKOLSKY



Los Van Van is perhaps Cuba's most enduring popular band and a virtual cultural institution for two generations of Cubans. Opposite page: Founder and musical director Juan Formel.

Traveling around Cuba with a name like Ron can be very interesting. In Spanish *ron* means rum, *la bebida nacional de Cuba*. No introduction ever happened without a little laughter, and levity is just what the hard-pressed Cuban people need more of right now, along with food, fuel and electricity. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc (Cuba's main trading partners) and the continued brutality of the U.S. blockade, Cubans have had to tighten their belts considerably. Like rum and laughter, music is the tonic that often gets them through the rough spots in what Fidel Castro has proclaimed to be a "Special Period in a Time of Peace."

My "official" reason for going to Cuba (i.e., the reason that provided a loophole in the U.S. government's travel restrictions) was to attend a conference of the North American-based Union for Democratic Communications (UDC) in Havana as a participant on a panel on community radio. Ironically, my involvement with Black Liberation Radio in Springfield, IL, an oppositional microwatt radio station which has been the target of the FCC "thought police" here in the States, is what enabled me to, in a sense, get the same federal government's approval under the terms of the "Trading with the Enemy Act" to fly the 90 miles from Miami to the "forbidden island."

Accompanying me on my flight down was the victorious Cuban baseball team which had just returned from Puerto Rico (minus a few defectors) where they had won the Pan-American games. Dispensing with the rigidities of Yankee airplane etiquette, some of the players spontaneously broke out their own bottle of rum and passed it around, while others sang or beat out the *clave* on their tray tables with cigarette lighters. Before too long we were lightheartedly cruising into José Martí International Airport.

Since the conference I was attending was put on by people with an interest in communications, music was definitely part of the agenda. Most impressive in this regard was a live performance by Los Van Van, perhaps Cuba's most enduring popular band and a virtual cultural institution for two generations of Cubans. The evening performance, which took place at the International Film and Video School just outside Havana, was preceded earlier in the afternoon by a panel discussion which included Juan Formel, the 51-year-old founder of Los Van Van, who is still the group's musical director. On attending this daytime session,

Formel struck me as a man who was both self-assured about the importance of his contributions to Cuban music and a very articulate speaker on the subject of what another panelist, Alberto Faya, the director of Casa de las Americas, called "the promotion dance."

"The blockade has put us at a great disadvantage," Formel said. "We don't appear in specialized music publications at the world level. While salsa music is basically Cuban, Japanese salsa groups are more well known than Los Van Van. If I lived in the United States, the world would know about us. We can be competitive in the international market, but we need promotion. We had a signed contract with Mango/Island for our recent *Songo* release, but they didn't promote it. There was no radio airplay. They never answered our faxes and the record disappeared from the market. A more recent record, *Dancing Wet*, a seven-year compilation of Los Van Van *exitos*, has sold well for World Pacific, a subsidiary of Capitol, in spite of the fact that it was not promoted. There were no comps given out to reviewers and radio stations. We could do even better if we had better promotion."

"Cuban artists and musicians have suffered the rigors of the blockade. The U.S. government won't let us come in, but we are informed about what's going on in the United States. We know, from listening to international radio stations, what's happening lately. We watch MTV. Sixty percent of Havana has access to MTV pirated from the tourist hotels. Yet the world still thinks of us as culturally isolated and remains to be convinced of our prominence and quality."

"The fact that the world doesn't know about our music is all a result of political interests. We are not played on Latin radio stations—only Cuban exile music, like Celia Cruz, is played. One exception is Radio Progreso in Miami." Fellow panelist Alberto Faya then summed it up nicely. "Sometimes the blockade works in a concrete way. Sometimes the idea of Cuba itself is blocked."

That evening Los Van Van backed up Juan Formel's words on the outdoor dance floor at the International School for Film and Video. After a libation of rum was ceremoniously poured for the Yoruba *orishas* by UDC's Bill Barlow (who does a "World Rhythms" show on Pacifica's WPFW-FM in Washington, DC), the band played a hot set that emphasized their trademark—the Afro-Cuban *songo* rhythm (a reworking of the basic *son* with electric instrumentation and rock flourishes). Its creator, Juan Formel, deftly wove his electric guitar in and out of percussion and string sections that kicked out counterpoint jams while the horns churned around the molten-hot rhythmic core. It was abundantly clear to all in attendance why Enrique Fernandez in his liner notes to their above-mentioned *Songo* recording had called Los Van Van "quite simply the best band in the world."

Once the concert ended, the film students who hail from all over Latin America and attend classes at the school on scholarship, took over. They were "in effect" for the rest of the night with a low-tech disco party offering up an eclectic boombox dance mix that included not only Latin music, but everything from James

ence that is the mainstay of the club. The youth were polite to this older generation band, using its music for background to their conversations, drinking and styling, but, except for a few, they refused to dance. However, when the band took a break and the sound system was turned up for the latest Los Van Van, NG La Banda or Dan Den disc, everyone was out in force on the spacious dance floor. Whatever older generation *habaneros* exist to support this music, they were not there that evening. Perhaps all of their energy was consumed in preparations for the private parties that mark the Dec. 4 Festival of Changó, the African *orisha* whose Christian counterpart is Santa Barbara. Rumbavana, on the eve of this festival, of course played "Qué Viva Changó," the classic tune associated with Cuban diva Celina Gonzalez.

The song itself is a touchstone for understanding the *criolla* nature of Cuban culture. When it first came out in the late '40s, it was the ultimate crossover record. Until then, at least on record, *guajira* music (sometimes called *musica campesina*), the music of the countryside, was influenced primarily by the Spanish side of the Cuban heritage. Guajira features

Spanish guitar and is less rhythmic, in an African sense, than such Cuban music as the forms of rumba known as *yambú*, *guaguanco* and *columbia*, or the sacred Yoruba music of *santería*. It also relies on the *decima* or ten-line stanza improvised by singers, often characterized by poetic competitions (or *comparsas*) between singers. However, even *guajira* is certainly not purely Spanish, or entirely without African content. Cuba is a mestizo culture given the inevitable racial mixing in relation to the two waves of Cuban slavery from Africa and Haiti, and of course, the early cultural impact of the Moorish presence in Spain itself.

In spite of this syncretic cultural mix, when Celina Gonzalez arrived on the scene in Havana from Santiago, crossovers between *guajira* and Afro-Cuban rumba/santeria were rare. Any such crossovers were more likely to be found with the rural *son*, originating in Oriente, and itself a *synthesis* of Hispanic musical components such as the guitar, *tres* and the mandolin-like *laud*, and Afro-Cuban rhythmic instruments like the bongos, *clavé*, *marimbula* (or large mbira) and the *botija* (or blown jug).

It was the African connection that the 20-year-old Celina (on lead vocals) and her husband Reutilio Domínguez, acting as second voice and providing guitar accompaniment, brought to the fore in their 1948 hit, "Santa Barbara/Qué Viva Changó." This recording

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Brown to Arrested Development to rockabilly and metal. (Can I really be dancing to Gene Vincent's "Be Bop A Lula" here under what Chuck Berry once called a "Havana Moon"? I wondered.)

Prior to Los Van Van's appearance that final night of the conference, I had already ventured into Havana to a club called El Tropical, a large open-air dancehall, for a performance by Conjunto Rumbavana. The group, originally founded in 1955 under the direction of Ricardo Ferro, has kept to its original *rumba* formula which has grown more and more solid over the years, but they seem to have lost their dance floor appeal for the youthful Afro-Cuban audi-

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daringly, for the time, praised both the Catholic saint and the Yoruba orisha in the same song as different manifestations of one another. In so doing, it, for the first time, made public on record something that had been happening among people of Spanish descent since the beginning of slavery: the adoption of the African-based religion known as santería. In Cuba, santería ceremonies are conducted not only in Yoruba, but in the Arará language of the Fon, Popo and Ewe groups from Dahomey (Benin); the Abacua language of Southwestern Nigeria and Cameroon associated with the Esangham and Elif peoples, and Kongo, which is a collective term and includes a variety of African ethnicities and languages. (All of these, by the way, are excellently documented on Rounder's new *Afro-Cuba* anthology).

Today, with Afro-Cuban music undergoing a renaissance in Cuba and santería worship less actively discouraged by the government, Celina

no longer feels compelled to concentrate her talents on the guajira side of her repertoire, and her current music places more emphasis on neo-African elements. Her recent Qbadisc release, while featuring a picture of her before her altar to Santa Barbara, is decidedly titled *Qué Viva Changó*, and the cd cover's colors are exclusively red and white (the colors of Changó). At this point having built on Celina's pioneering efforts, the use of a mixture of santería-based popular dance lyrics and rhythms has become the norm, so that Dan Den's recent release, *Viejo Lázaro*, is also about Babalú Ayé. Celina, now 64, not only has an altar to Santa Barbara in her back room, but one to the "warrior" orisha, Oggun, in her front room, with El Comandante's photo resting firmly above it (Castro himself is reputedly protected by Elegguá). When I visited her home, an altar to San Lázaro had been constructed for the upcoming festival of Babalú Ayé.

Celina's weekly performances in Havana occur at the swimming pool of the plush Hotel Nacional. Since I was attending the International Festival of New Latin American Film that week (won by Cuba's Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Fresa y Chocolate*, by the way) which had headquarters at the Nacional, I decided to check her out although I knew the atmosphere would be a little stuffy for my tastes. After one "no show" evening due to an illness on her part, I managed to catch her later in my visit on the eve of the Festival of San Lázaro/Babalú Ayé. While her husband Reutilio is now dead, her son Reutilio Jr. has filled

in on vocal duets, and has a suave nightclub act of his own preceding the entrance of *La Reina* herself. In spite of the stiffness of some of the preceding performances that evening and the slickness of the venue, I was hopeful of being bowled over by Celina and was not disappointed.

When she finally took the stage, she crossed herself, and did four songs, each of which were for the orisha deities. She first began by knocking on the floor to salute Babalú Ayé, performing amid dancers writing in movements of pain and suffering while dressed in sackcloth. These stylized costumes represented the makeshift sackcloth clothing often worn by pilgrims to the shrine of San Lázaro in Rincón.

Lázaro is the patron saint of the sick and infirm, who is appealed to by joining the annual pilgrimage which was to take place in the early morning hours of the following day. Pilgrims commit to walk or crawl (sometimes with heavy stones shackled to their legs) for the 16-mile distance. The event, in which I participated, is a massive (10,000 people) act of public healing and penance which routinely goes unreported in the Cuban media because of its religious nature, and which was misrepresented in the U.S. media this year as an explicitly anti-Castro event rather than a Christian pilgrimage with a strong Afro-Cuban flavor. During the procession, Babalú Ayé, the orisha who can bring pestilence or take it away, is invoked by the use of the branch of a bush associated with him which sweeps away stones or obstacles in the path of the pilgrims, particularly those who are crawling along in the street. Many of the altars in houses along the route reflect the presence of both San Lázaro and Babalú Ayé.

As to the other Yoruba gods celebrated by Celina that night at the Nacional, she, as expected, did a scorching version of "Qué Viva Changó." Changó is associated with fire, lightning and thunder. After procuring a little rum from someone in the audience for a libation to her personal orisha, volcanic drumming with dancers clad in red and white combined with her ecstatic vocals to create an ambience that subverted even the confines of the stately Hotel Nacional. Another number was dedicated to all of the orisha deities collectively, and each dancer donned a costume associated with a particular god, with drumming nuanced for each one. The intensity of the dancing spurred Celina to the limits of her stamina as a woman in her 60s. Of course, all of the ecstatic states of possession are simulated and stylized as a performance for a paying audience, but since Celina and the dancers are all themselves consecrated in santería, it is not simply play-acting on their part. Unlike the concert for Changó done by Vocal Marfil that I had earlier seen at El Gran Teatro of Havana which was a little too tame and folkloric for my tastes, Celina's performance, while not of the house party variety, was too idiosyncratic to be purely formulaic.

For a more direct santería experience, I trav-



PHOTO BY NOR MILLER



Above:
San Lázaro/Babalú Ayé altar on Havana street.
Right, the legendary rumba band, Los Muñequitos de Matanzas.

eled to Matanzas, where I was fortunate enough to be allowed, after being properly anointed and protected, to observe a ritual in preparation for the festival of Babalú Ayé at a house dedicated to Oya, the stormy goddess of the Niger River who is a consort of Changó. Although we were still in Cuba, once I walked through the door of this run-down old dwelling, I was miraculously transported to Africa. We introduced ourselves and were enveloped in an atmosphere that was unmistakably African. As we left, I felt my head spinning from the rum which we had brought as a gift—or was it the orishas?

The next night, in conjunction with Yoruba chanting, several chickens and a goat were slaughtered on altars. The heart of the goat was given to the frail bedridden woman who was the santera to ceremoniously kiss before the ritual ended and the animals were prepared for the feast to be held a few days later. As I took my leave, I knocked on the floor by the severed goat's head in tribute to Babalú Ayé. We picked up the letters that we had agreed to deliver to the States and made our exit. Later that week at Guanabacoa's Museum of Santería, I saw similar altars on display, looking a little sterile now in a museum setting without all the blood and feathers everywhere.

On another day I was taken to a house in Perico presided over by an elderly woman named Judith, the matriarch of this spiritual community dedicated to San Lázaro/Babalú Ayé. Here the language spoken was Gangá, not Yoruba, and the drums and melodies associated with santería practice were Senegambian. I was then shown the first (original) drums to be played by Senegambians in Cuba. They were hanging enshrined on the wall, now very fragile with age. A sacred site indeed! On another day I was taken to a house dedicated to Eleguá (the trickster orisha of the crossroads) and no sooner did I enter the door than I saw sitting before me the man who I had picked up hitchhiking near Veradero earlier that day. He smiled at me, obviously pleased that our paths should cross again at this place but unlike me, not one bit surprised.

In Limonar we went to a house dedicated to Changó, where we met a Yoruba priest who is one of the foremost *guiro* (gourd rattle) players in Afro-Cuban sacred music. He complained to us about never having gotten royalties for the classic lp he once made for the Cuban Areito label, entitled *Toqué de Guiros*. I didn't bother to write down his name thinking I would get it off of the album when I returned to the States. Upon returning, I got out the album and, while his picture is imprinted there, his name does not appear. So, I am afraid you are still nameless, my friend, although your cause is not. His story was sadly similar to that of Robelio Pérez López, the *charanga* drummer and priest of Oggún, who I later met in Bejucal. Although a long-awaited festival of *charanga* was to be held in Bejucal later that month, he asserted that his music, rooted in the sacred Yoruba tradition, was presently being diluted into just another dance rhythm for sale in the pop marketplace.

While these musicians have been shabbily treated, other musicians who play santería music in a secular context have achieved some degree of success without trivializing its sacred origins. The best-known group of Cuban musicians playing Yoruba-based music for popular audiences is the Muñequitos de Matanzas. Together since 1956, they have lately, acquired a large following. Stateside due to their recent appearance on NPR's "Afropop Worldwide" in concert in New York City during their last tour of *Los Estados Unidos*.

Luckily being in the right place at the right time, I got a chance to see them play in Matanzas. Before ever having been to Matanzas myself, I was wandering about the Hotel Nacional in order to decide what films to see that day when I was approached by a man associated with "Matanzas Day" at the film festival. He was trying to interest festival participants like me in a bus ride to Matanzas (around 100 kilometers away in a country where fuel is in short supply and gasoline/car rental prices are high). Once we arrived, we would be provided with a lavish meal in the local hotel and a chance to see a Peruvian film entered at the festival. Then we would be interviewed on the local radio station, and finally taken to a party at a club called La Tar where the Muñequitos would perform—all for free. After my jaw stopped dropping, I quickly agreed and we were off within the hour.

While many festival participants had never heard of the Muñequitos, being mostly interested in film, for me they were the main reason I was on the bus. I had always hoped to see them live someday, maybe even in Cuba, but to get an opportunity to hear them play on their home turf in Matanzas was even more than I had hoped for. They are the legendary Cuban rumba band. Their use of the sacred double-headed *batá* drums evidences deep roots in santería. Although, of course, these drums are not consecrated and the context is secular, members of the band still regularly play in a more sacred setting as well.

Their specialty is a form of rumba known as *guaguanco* and their lineup that night consisted of musicians playing a myriad of percussion (batá, congas, bongos, clavés, and rhythm box), costumed dancers and a vocal choir. Beginning with an invocation to Changó, they then went on to salute Obatalá and Eleguá with the percussion music and folkloric dances that have become their mark of distinction. While these days they are cosmopolitans (their conga drums all come

from Latin Percussions in New York), their music is still very much rooted in the traditional culture of their origins. In fact, Ana Pérez, one of their dancers and vocalists, who I met by chance on my next visit to Matanzas, insisted that it is the same exact music as you would hear in a santería ceremony. As I left for Havana, she reminded me that the Muñequitos will be back to the States in June for another tour.

Not all of my musical experiences in Cuba were strictly Afro-Cuban, but no music is without some African content in Cuba. Each Saturday in Matanzas, one of three different bands perform as part of *Sabados de La Rumba*. On the Saturday that I was there I got to hear *Serenito Yumorris* in an outdoor cafe setting just off the square doing an excellent traditional *musica campesina* set for a local audience with no tourists present. During the course of the afternoon, several different vocalists came up to sing rumba or do *contravosarios* (poetic improvisations) with the band. For their part, the Yumorris included an especially hot tres player who engaged in an ongoing dialogue

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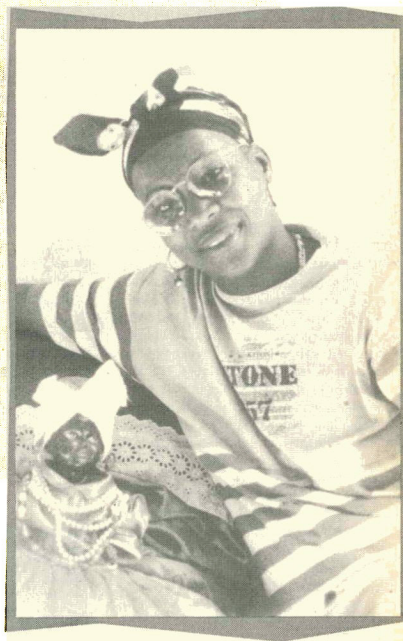


PHOTO BY LISA MAYA KRAUER

Ana Pérez, singer/dancer with Los Muñequitos.

CELINA CONZÁLEZ:

Queen of the Punto Cubano

**Interview with Idania
and Michel Diaz and Ivor Miller,
Dec. 14, 1993, in the home of
Celina Conzález in Havana,
Cuba. Translated from Spanish
by Ivor Miller**

Q: Where were you and your husband born?
A: My husband Reutilio was from Guantánamo Province. He was born in San Antonio Redo, known today as El Central Manuel Tames. I was born in Jovellanos, la Nueva Lisa, in Matanzas Province. My parents moved east to Santiago de Cuba when I was a young girl. Reutilio and I met in Santiago de Cuba. We started dating and then we married. Without any formal schooling he played the guitar more

wonderfully than any I've heard in my life. His music brought people to their feet. In that time one had to be an artist! If you weren't an artist the audience would throw tomatoes at you in a minute. But our two voices made an impact, he was the second and I the lead. And we dedicated ourselves to work together. We were inseparable as lovers, as a married couple, and as partners in art.

We began to work for the Oriente radio network in 1947. We arrived in Havana on Nov. 2, and were contracted for one week by the radio station Suaritos. By the end of the week we had composed the number "Santa Barbara."

Before composing the song, Santa Barbara had appeared to me twice in dreams. She asked me to sing for her, she said if I didn't I would not succeed, and if I did I would travel the

world. When I made the song, it became a hit in Cuba, and then internationally, and from there we became famous around the world.

She also told me that I was going to enter into *santería*. But many years passed until I was initiated in 1959. I was initiated as a daughter of the sanctified Virgen de Regla, Yemayá.
Q: In the development of your art with your spiritual life, to what do you attribute your success?

A: I never look at the audience; I concentrate so much that at times I feel afraid, because I have lost my senses at times, especially when I sing for Santa Barbara.

Q: Is it like a possession?

A: When I am on the stage I am not me, and I feel it. I am uprooted, I feel that it's not normal, that it's supernatural, because I don't look at the audience. I have dancers, above all one that dances for Yemayá, and at times I distance myself from her. One day, during the performance I was dancing and dancing and I said "Ay, Yemayá is going to come." I told the dancer "girl, go on over there," and I left from where she was, and began to look at the public because if I didn't, Yemayá would have mounted me for sure.

Q: On what do you base the compositions of your songs?

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with the poets and richly embellished the music of the vocalists, one of whom did yet another version of "Qué Viva Changó."

In a more urbane vein, I later caught Silvio Rodríguez in concert with the Matanzas Symphony in an event celebrating the achievements of Cuban artists and cultural workers. While "sensitive folkies" have never been a personal favorite of mine, Rodríguez held the crowd (many of whom proved to be unabashed singalong fans) in the palm of his hand with delicately constructed songs of love and hope, and his collaboration with the symphony orchestra similarly worked effectively. His appeal seems primarily to be to the middle-aged generation for whom the 1959 Cuban Revolution is something within memory. Lately he has been faced with competition from the harder-edged music of young folk-rocker Carlos Varela, who I caught on video at the film festival. Varela's music is, like Silvio's, poetic, but more uncertain about the future and very critical of the current state of the Revolution which has, in the past, gotten him in trouble with the government. In response to changing times, Silvio has recently collaborated lyrically on an interesting album (*El Hombre Extraño*) with the youthful band of rockers known as Síntesis. Similarly, Síntesis has also successfully recorded with another older generation musician, Lázaro Ros, whose vocals on their joint effort, *Ancestros*, are taken straight from Yoruba chanting. So once again my journey had taken me back to the African orishas.

Much to my surprise, on Dec. 8, I had an opportunity to attend an event in Havana pay-

ing homage to the memory of Lennon—not Lenin, but (John) Lennon. This concert seemed to offer an unexpected detour in my pursuit of Afro-Cuban music. The scene was an outdoor event in Havana at Parque Lennon attended by a young rock-oriented audience, many of them students from the nearby university. The performances combined '60s nostalgia with a celebration of the spirit of freedom of that decade, and appropriately neo-African music was not absent after all. The festivities opened with an a cappella version of "We Shall Overcome" sung on stage and by the audience, accompanied by U.S. civil rights footage on a large-screen video monitor. Somewhere along the way, the event included an anthemic version of "All You Need Is Love" accompanied by video images of the Beatles, to which the assembled crowd sang along together, often in English.

As these gentle vibes filled the air, I fantasized a world with no blockade. "You may say

that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one." While the question of whether it will take *aché* (the power of the orishas) to bring it about, or a protracted political struggle here in what Ché Guevara once called "the belly of the beast," or some combination of the two, is debatable; but change itself is inevitable. I dedicate this article then to creating the kinds of changes necessary to break the blockade so that cultural interchange between the Cuban people and the people of the United States is no longer held prisoner to the antiquated policies of the Cold War....Imagine!

Muchas gracias y un abrazo to those compañeros who guided me on my musical and spiritual journey in Cuba: Israel Moliner Castaneda and Gladys Gutierrez in Matanzas; and Ivor Miller, Idania Diaz, Michel Diaz, Miria Diaz, and El Grupo Triangulo in La Habana.

CUBAN RECORDING/VIDEO SOURCES

In the old days, I used to get my Cuban records from a friend in Poland in exchange for blues records from the U.S. It's actually much easier now to obtain the latest in Cuban music from Latin music mail order houses like Descarga (328 Flatbush Ave., Suite 180, Brooklyn, NY 11238, 1-800-377-2647), or solidarity groups acting as distributors dealing exclusively in Cuban musical recordings and videos. The two that have the most extensive catalogs are:

Center for Cuban Studies, 124 W. 23rd St., New York, NY 10011; (212) 242-0559 (phone), (212) 242-1937 (fax)

Publications and Exchange, Inc., 8306 Mills Drive, Ste. 241, Miami, FL 33183; (305) 256-0162

CELINA GONZÁLEZ · CELINA GONZÁLEZ · CELINA GONZÁLEZ

A: My son Francisco Javier Dominguez, who presents my show [in French, English and Spanish], always says "songs interpreted in the manner of Reutillo and Celina." We don't sing in the Yoruba language, but in Spanish so all the Spanish-speaking peoples will understand. Sometimes I put a few Yoruba words.

For example in the Church she is known as Santa Barbara, but in *santería* as Changó. I have a song to Obatala, who is the sanctified Virgin de las Mercedes in Catholicism. Also we made a song to Eleguá that's been recorded throughout the world. The Church knows him as Saint Niño de Atoche, others call him San Roque. Thus Eleguá is represented [when he speaks during the *Ita*] in the initiation room as either a child or as a man. Ogun is known as San Pedro, but he has many avatars, such as San Juan el Bautista or Santiago de Apostol. And Ochoosis, who is the great hunter, is known as San Norberto. Because where he points his arrow, it hits the mark. We have songs for all of them, including Yemayá, who is my guardian angel, my Yemayá is called Asesu. Also the sanctified Virgin de la Caridad del Cobre, who is Ochún.

Reutillo and I also dedicated a song to San Lazaro, and apart from this, I have my own song for San Lazaro. The latest song I wrote, that I'm going to record, is a prayer to Oya, "Jecua-Je Yansa." For her I made a beautiful song. This song I made alone, because it is the last that I've composed.

We have songs for all the saints, but in our own style so that everyone can interpret them. Because to a *santero* you can speak a Yoruba word, and he'll understand you. But an *aleyo* no. An *aleyo* is someone who doesn't have *ocha* [hasn't been initiated as a *santera*]. And then if he doesn't understand what you're saying, why are you singing to them? Not only so they'll dance, but also so they'll understand what you are manifesting. And songs that arrive, that move the public.

Q: Have you had success outside of the country?
A: In Colombia they named me "The Goddess of Colombia." When I enter on stage, everyone begins to ask for the song "Santa Barbara!" "San Lazaro!" "El Hijo de Eleguá," "A Francisco." Francisco is a Congo [a spirit of the dead] of my godfather Chango-Dina, who initiated me, and to this spirit I made a song that is called "A Francisco."

In England they call me "Queen of country music." The group that went with me [to England] is Congo Alegre and they were well received. There was a lot of excitement, with lines and lines to see our show. The newspapers said that people there are saturated with electronic music, they became very emotional with

our music. They came to the stage to see the bongos, the drums, the marimba of Mario Europea. The music of the lute was emotional to the audience. The tres also called a lot of attention.

Q: Which group are you working with now?



Celina Gonzalez (right) with Idania Diaz in front of her altar to Santa Barbara/Changó.

A: Now I have a group that's called Piquete Cubano. It's traditional creole music, and the musicians are young, something that makes me happy. It's directed by Barbaro Torres, who is considered at this time to be the best luteist in Cuba, because Raul Lima died, master of country music on the lute. The second master was Jose Manuel Rodrigues, who we also had the misfortune to lose.

We present a show that is primarily *música campesina*. My son Lazaro Reutillo is presented as a songwriter and soloist. Afterwards we present the music of Celina and Reutillo. Then we sing some Yoruba-based songs and close with popular music where Reutillo sings boleros and guaracha; he's a great singer and that's how we end, but my music is completely country.

We interpret *música campesina* like it is. I don't argue with the younger people, because everything evolves, and logically young people want to be creative. For example Liuba Maria and Maria Victoria have wonderful voices, Maria Victoria sings *música campesina* beautifully. But I continue interpreting my music in

the manner of Celina and Reutillo, accompanied by my two sons and my group Piquete Cubano.

Q: Would you speak about other types of traditional Cuban music?

A: The only place they dance the rumba and the *guaguancó* is in Matanzas. In all the shows of this country they don't include a pair of rumba dancers. Why not, if the rumba is Cuban? Before [the Revolution] there wasn't a show where they didn't present a pair of rumba dancers. Like Rolando, who is one of the greatest dancers. Tremendous *rumbo*! I've had shows where he danced with his partner Ana Gloria...can't touch that! At this moment the only interpreters of the rumba are in Matanzas.

Our music comes from the Cuban Mambises that struggled for Cuban independence. Because of this Reutillo and I made the song "Yo Soy el Punto Cubano," that says "I lived in the hills, when the Mambi battled, with a machete in hand." They took the tres, the lute, and they sang on the savannah or in the hills where they fought for Cuba. Why has this tradition died?

Musica campesina must be defined. Every region in Cuba has its own music. For example, in Oriente you have the *guajira* de salon, the *son montuno*, and the *punto campesino*, that have many tunes. In the central part of the country including Santa Clara and Santi Spiritu they play the *espirituas*. In Camaguey, the *tonadas* *campesinianas*. In Matanzas, the *tonadas* *carabajal*, that are the *españololas*. In La Isla de

Juventud (the Isle of Youth), the *sucu-sucu*.

Q: What are your personal experiences with the great musicians of Cuba like Benny Moré, Barbarito Diez, and Chapotín?

A: I met Benny on a tour with Reutillo and I in New York. I liked him very much, he called me "guajira" and liked to hear my music.

Barbarito Diez, Reutillo and I worked together in New York. When he went on stage singing "Virgín de Regla Compadesete de Mí" (Virgin of the Rule Sympathize with Me), it was incredible; the entire audience was at their feet. And this before coming on stage he asked me "Celina, do you think they'll like me here?" And I told him, "Muchocho, don't you see that on every street corner there's a juke box with the records of you and me?" This was a tremendous success and we were all crying with emotion.

We've worked with many figures like Pedro Vargas, Accedes Mejías, Avelina Landín, El Trio Tamaiul and Peco, Libertá Lamarque, Jorge Negrete, Los Chabales de España, in short, with the greatest figures in the era of the '50s. I also knew Chapotín. ★