

## Chapter Eleven

### Epilogue: Music and Change

New World it is, for those who became its peoples remade it, and in the process, they remade themselves.

Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price  
*The Birth of African-American Culture*

One bright February morning, I stood high on the ramparts of Morro Castle, the sixteenth-century guardian of Havana Harbor. Leaning on the cold parapet, I gazed out to the clear waters of the Caribbean, then back across the channel to the crumbling buildings of Old Havana. In my mind, the city was young again, and I was a Spanish soldier nervously watching a British frigate closing to fire—I was a Cuban merchant relieved to see one of my slave ships safely sailing into the canal, laden with black gold—I was a passerby stopping at the dock to assess a group of slaves who had chains on their wrists and fear in the eyes—I was an African man, alone, with no words on my tongue to tell others of the wonder in my heart at this new and unfamiliar world.

I have been told I have an overactive and somewhat romantic imagination. This is an asset for a novelist and a hindrance for a journalist. But flights of fancy, when clearly labeled, obscure the subject less than do well-meaning but biased scientific assumptions. Anthropology suffers, at least historically, from two underlying presuppositions that alter the way it collects and views information. The first is a nineteenth-century concept, conceived by misreading Rousseau, that the “native” is a pure, and consequently static, being, and that the search for data on this indigenous being is actually a quest for truth. And, of course, truth is eternal, so some older ethnographic studies read like stone tablets from the mount: “This is how they act. This is what they believe.” But in fact there is no eternal ethnographic truth. People change. After hearing Cuban batá drummers play, an old Yoruban man living in New York said that the rhythms were of his grandfather's time and could no longer be heard in his country (Ortiz, 1996: 183). Traditional African drumming is evolving, as is Cuban. But the ethnographer often writes his findings as distinct from the continuum that created them. The danger is that it implies a static truth—“This is the way the santeros play. This is the way the paleros sing”—when in reality all culture is in constant adaptation. This is the way they played and sang *that day*.

The other assumption, which goes hand in hand with the first, is that these pure

societies are being destroyed by the soulless cultural imperialism of the West, and that they must be recorded before the flood of western contamination extinguishes their natural goodness. One of the positive results of cultural relativism, now that western culture is no longer considered as the paradigm by which others are measured, is that it can no longer be perceived as meritless either. All cultures can be seen as equal. The new televisions that alter traditional ways of life in Native American communities cannot be seen as cultural imperialism because TV altered western culture as much as it did Native American. Both cultures change and both are now victims or victors, depending on your point of view. This is true in Cuba as well. The process of transculturation that created the various meta-ethnic traditions, black and white, continues today. While some traditions are being weakened or extinguished, they are also being translated into evolving contributions of contemporary art and thought. Roberto Vizcaino says that Pedro Izquierdo (Pello el Afrokán) created *mozambique* by adapting Obanlá from batá to congas. José Quintana (Changuito) borrowed from mozambique to develop *songo*, and the funky feel of songo can still be felt in the *timba* grooves of Charanga Habanera. Instead of looking back towards the Garden of Eden, we might well look forward. Entropy is balanced by creativity, and the only way to gain insight into its dynamic is to try and view the process from a less angled perspective.

Cultural loss is inevitable if society is to continue growing. All music played before the invention of the phonograph has been, in one sense, lost. Writing it down or teaching it to someone does not save the original performance. More was lost when 78 rpm became standard, and much of that vanished when only some of those recordings were transferred to 33 rpm. And thousands of 33 rpm albums are not available on CD. I once came across a dumpster filled with old 78s and have been haunted ever since by the possibility that a rare performance was lost to humanity when that dumpster was hauled off. Today on that site there is a recording engineering school. It seems to me that we need dumpster pickers as much as we need engineering students, if for no other reason than to show them the roots of the art they hope to augment. Those records were not in that dumpster because they were trash, but because they were perceived as being economically useless. By the time their value is recognized, they will have been lost in the landfill for many years. You can't know where you are if you don't know where you've been, and it is painful to realize that not everything can be saved. I have gleaned as much information as I could from my sources, as they did from theirs, and all of it is a handful of sand on a very long beach. Others, far more thoroughly than I, are doing the same. And musicians, beneficiaries of a rich tradition, are using these rhythms as part of the foundation for new musics that express yesterday's cultural roots in tomorrow's musical styles.

Two of the main currents in Cuban music were the folkloric Afro-Cuban traditions that developed into rumba and comparsa, and the son tradition that evolved into contemporary popular music. Each had some traits in common with the other (and with other genres as well), and both continually borrowed, sharing until they were transformed, fusing together to create new styles while still retaining their own identities. Contemporary Cuban music also absorbs aspects of jazz, funk, rock, and rap, but its sophisticated harmonies and home-boy vocal stylings are built on an Afro-Cuban rhythmic foundation that evolved from within while embracing European harmonic and melodic structures, then later, the chord progressions, orchestrations, and song forms of jazz, as well as the back beat that so dominates North American popular music. But to say that the African, European, and American influences have contributed more or less equally to Cuban music, while possibly true, completely ignores the fact that the stylistic hand on the wheel, the driving force in its evolution, the collective artistic will that molded the sound, is Cuban.

So in the end, much of the original African dance, language, and music have been lost in the creation of new artistic expressions. What the folkloric traditions have lost has been replaced, transculturated into forms that are intrinsically part of Cuban music and dance: rumba and comparsa, and newer forms, not so traditional perhaps, but at the edge of the music's evolution. Yet much remains that can be traced back to these roots. One can see the function of the *katá* in Palo evolving into the *guagua* of rumba then into the *cáscara* of timbales. The rich harmonic structures of jazz have brought a new aspect to the complicated rhythms that revolve around the clave. The original African call and response can be found in the montunos of songo and timba, creating new musics from traditional ones. And groups such as Irakere have reversed the process by starting with a contemporary jazz framework and bringing folkloric elements like *batá* and *orisha* song into a modern musical architecture. Anyone who wishes to unravel this complicated tangle of modern and traditional, innovative and folkloric, sacred and sacrilegious, must pick a place and make a start, sorting and resorting to achieve small victories of understanding in a sea of non-comprehension.

For a non-Latino musician attempting to gain some proficiency in the vast, confusing world of Cuban music, the quest becomes one of time and place, and of people. By traveling back historically and out geographically, first over a little strait then across a fathomless ocean, one is immersed in the stories of millions of people, a rainbow of skin color, and a roaring flood of uprooted lives. It is a history movie run in reverse, a slowly rethreading spool of film that, for me, began at a toque in Regla and ended up on the beach with Columbus as the first natives walked down to the shore to greet him. And so the circle is complete.