

Constructing Space in Havana's New Music Scene: Reimagining the Streets of Havana as the Home of Cuban Music

Snezhina Gulubova

Royal Holloway University of London

Abstract

Cuba's rich musical legacy has been one of the island's most important national and international contributions for over 100 years. Since the end of 2011, Cuba has undergone the most significant socioeconomic changes since its 1959 Socialist Revolution. These include the introduction of private property, launch and growth in internet access, and a significant increase in travel from and to the island. As a result, the country entered a new phase in its music production and scholarship, altering Havana's music scene, profession and the geographies of Cuban music. A key location in Cuba's music scene is "the street", regarded as the home of music, and where both Cubans and visitors have their first encounters with music on the island. Following the new socioeconomic adjustments on the island, the streets of Havana are transforming, and so is their relationship to Cuban music and musicians. The street is a physical locale and an abstract imaginary where music is created, produced and performed, and its image is circulated both on the island and abroad. I argue that with the introduction of private property ownership to the island and the proliferation of privately-owned music venues across Havana, the role of the street as the home of Cuban music has been reconfigured from an actual locale to an imaginary where musicians are searching for identity and authenticity in a rapidly commercialising world. Streets are converted from the site where any underprivileged Afro-Cuban child can learn to play and perform music to world-class standards to the home of five-star hotels, exclusive shopping malls and Chanel's seasonal catwalk. I further investigate how this image of "the street" as the home of Cuban music continues to infuse contemporary songs through images and lyrics, and is internationally exported, creating a distorted image of Havana's music scene abroad.

Keywords: Havana, Music Scene, Street; Music Profession; Geographies of Cuban Music

Snezhina Gulubova is a Cuban studies scholar and a performer of Afro-Cuban percussion and singing. She is currently working on her doctoral research on Cuban music at the Royal Holloway University of London studying the contemporary Cuban music and cultural scenes of Havana and London.

It was April 2018 and I was on the field in Havana, working on the recording of a new jazz album by trombone player Eduardo Sandoval. Currently one of Cuba's most prolific and influential musicians, Alain Pérez was the album's producer. In an interview with local TV station Canal Habana, Pérez made the following statement met with laughter and applause:

Because Cuba is truly musically great, it is great musically... We have a lot of beautiful history, a lot of Cuban music, a lot of flavour, a lot of street, we have always had it... Because where does music come from. From the street! Thank you!

The statement and the reactions to it made me think about the relationship between the street as a location and Cuban music. They brought questions about the reasons for which Pérez felt so strong about "the street" as a key ingredient and birthplace of Cuban music. The closest I had seen him to be on the street is when he had to push the car of the sound engineer because it refused to start one evening after recording. I had also not yet seen Sandoval walking on the streets of Havana and any necessity to walk for a few minutes to catch a taxi was always accompanied by great complaints and resistance. To understand these anxieties, my paper examines the following three aspects of the relationship between Cuban music and "the street": first, I discuss how the streets of Havana are transforming physically, socially and culturally, and the impact this has on their position as the home of Cuban people, music and culture; second, I investigate the reasons due to which Cuban musicians are so keenly trying to establish a connection between themselves and their music, and "the street"; and finally, I study how the proliferation of private music venues across Cuba's capital is impacting the musical profession, relocating Cuban musicians from the public spaces of "the street" to the private locations of the new modern clubs and bars.

The changing socio-economic environment of Havana is marked by two periods. The first is the "Special Period", which started in the early 1990s as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Block and subsidies to Cuba. This led to severe shortages and plummeting living standards and the legalisation of the private possession of dollars. This pushed the state-run economy into a *sociocapitalist* model, which entails the blending of

socialism and capitalism in joint ventures for the construction of infrastructure which caters for foreigners and a small Cuban elite, however, with little impact for most habaneros (Baker 2011). This model further developed during the second period on which my research is focuses. It is the post-2011 era during which Cuba has undergone the most significant socio-economic changes since its 1959 Revolution. These include first, the introduction of private property ownership; second, launch and growth of internet access, and finally, a significant increase in travel from and to the island. Following these changes in Cuba's socio-economic landscape, the country entered a new phase in its music production and scholarship, altering Havana's music scene, profession and the geographies of Cuban music of which "the street" is a primary location.

If we are to have a historical look at where popular Cuban genres emerged stylistically, Pérez's statement holds quite true. Rumba came from the *solares* (Figure 1) and the poor neighbourhoods of Havana and Matanzas. *Solares* are huge, multifamily buildings built in the 1950s that extend deep into the middle of the block with inner patios, labyrinthine passages and twisting stairways. They house the poorest of Havana's society, comprised predominantly of Afro-Cubans. Rumba was the secular protest music of the slave enclaves, and impoverished Afro-Cuban areas where the cajón emerged as an instrument made from cargo boxes due to prohibitions of slaves to use musical instruments; and the rumba singing emerged as a conversation between the slaves on the different plantations. It further developed on the streets as a form of protest against the social and ethnic inequalities in Cuban society, representing the marginalised, underprivileged and the African community. Another national popular genre, the *conga*, is carnival music performed in street carnivals in Santiago de Cuba and Havana. The name is said to have emerged from the term *congo*, which used to refer to the slaves brought from the Congo region in Africa. Historically, it was only during these carnivals that Afro-Cuban *cabildos* (social clubs) were permitted to form street processions with drumming and dancing. More recently, the genre which grew exponentially as a musical representation of the Special Period, *tímba*, is also intricately connected to street culture through the strong influence of rumba. Urban styles such as hip-hop also came from the barrios and public spaces of Cuba. It can be argued that many popular genres of Cuban music can be seen as stylistically emanating from the open public spaces of Havana, from the neighbourhoods, and the streets where even the most impoverished and underprivileged population had the opportunity to be educated in the performance of the music and had access to its consumption.



Figure 1: Solar, Centro Habana
Photo: *Memorias de Un Cubano*

The public domain has traditionally been the key location for the performance and consumption of music in Cuba. The street is also where social interaction and gatherings have traditionally taken place and continue to offer some entertainment for many young Cubans today. Havana fully epitomised Walter Benjamin's description of streets as "the dwelling places of the collective", even though to a much lesser degree nowadays. *Avenue de Los Presidentes* (G street) still hosts free concerts (even if only a few times a year) by popular Cuban performers such as X Alfonso and Silvio Rodríguez. Many young Cubans with limited financial means continue to socialise along the Malecón, Havana's five-mile seaside boulevard and esplanade. National celebrations such as Labour Day or Revolution Day are also celebrated on the streets of Havana. It is, therefore, that the streets of Havana embody meaning and memory for Cubans, connected to their personal experiences with the public domain, emotions and self-characterisation through their participation in public life and interactions with others on the street.

Despite these few examples where social life still takes place in the open public domain, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find music on the streets of Havana. Sporadic street performances can be heard in the touristic parts of Old Havana. Mostly, son and salsa classics coming from the cafes and bars along Obispo in an attempt to get the passing tourists to enter these establishments where the actual consumption of the music happens alongside the consumption of food and alcohol. Simultaneously, Old Havana is physically transforming rapidly. Following several restoration projects since the Special Period, certain parts of the area have been renovated. This has been coupled with the building of new exclusive hotels such as the recently opened Hotel Paseo del Prado, the Manzana Kempinski (Figure 2), and the luxury shopping mall Manzana de Gomez right next to it. Havana's 500 anniversary was celebrated with grandeur and lights in front of the Capitolio (Figure 3) in November 2019.

Only a few steps down from the Capitolio and Obispo street starts Paseo del Prado, where the global fashion brand Chanel had their first catwalk ever in Cuba in 2016. The show started with a smooth piano opening followed by folkloric Santeria singing by the Cuban-French twin sisters Ibeyi. Santeria is an Afro-Cuban system of beliefs and practices which developed through the syncretism of African spirituality and Catholicism due to the prohibition against the practice of the natural spiritual ways of African slaves. The singing is deep, settled, somewhat reminding of a Cuban version of the fusion sound of lounge bar series such as Cafe del Mar and Buddha Bar. The piano is joined by a jazzy drum, and men and women dressed in evening attires are wearing the Chanel fashionable version of the Cuban colonial sombrero. The catwalk closes with conga from Santiago de Cuba (18min 55 sec). Described as "the soul" of Cuba's most eastern province, conga embodies the sentiment and life of the street and its people, blending cultural, patriotic and religious influences and Cuba's African heritage and history of slavery (Boobbyer 2016).

When watching the show it is difficult to guess it was staged in Cuba if it were not for the catwalk of emblematic cars parked along the sidewalks (the old 1920s to 1950s American and European cars, which still fill the streets of Cuba). This particular line-up is of the well-maintained models which can charge tourists up to \$500 for an hour's tour around the popular sights of Havana. The evening which took place few blocks away from the *solares* of Central Havana portrays the transformation of the streets of Havana and the growing contradictions within Cuban society during this new period of socio-economic changes and the deepening of the *sociocapitalism* in the country. One can also notice the fashionably dressed audiences are sitting on the benches along Prado.

There are only a few onlookers on the empty pavements and streets around the avenue. The show was not open to the public and was only by invitation. During this event, Paseo del Prado was not like the streets of Havana where everyone can join the gathering and celebrate together. The catwalk was exclusive, a mark of the new post-socialist economic consciousness and transformation of Havana's society and physical geographies; it represents the privatisation of a traditionally public space, drawing borders and setting requirements for entry to around what previously had been an all-inclusive space. Hence, the meaning which the street embodies as a shared public location for all *habaneros* is changing, because of its changing features. Per Gustafson articulates that place is connected to the experience of the self, together with emotions and self-identity; environment, including physical features and events; and the relationship we have with other people who share the place (Gustafson 2001: 5 - 16). In the context of Havana, the physical transformation of the streets is accompanied by a form of privatisation of their previously public status, restricting the access and freedom of participation of citizens in the life on the street, and in their ability to share the space with the new-comers or with each other because of the emerging class and economic distinctions.

Beyond Paseo del Prado and the Chanel Catwalk, the area is transforming significantly. It was only shortly after Chanel's venture to Cuba that the Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski La Habana and its luxury mall, based around the corner from where the show took place, opened in 2017. With a roof swimming pool and dishes between \$20 and \$30 for the main course (equal to the monthly salary of many government employees), the hotel does not allow visitors to dine in its rooftop restaurant without prior reservation. Furthermore, with L'Occitane perfumes at \$73, at least twice the national salary of a university professor, the mall remains prohibitive to most *habaneros* (The Guardian 2017).



Figure 2: Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski
Photo: *Jacada Travel* (www.jacadatravel)

At the same time, it is not only Pérez who keeps referring to the street as the home of Cuban music. Gente de Zona's global reggaetón hit *La Gozadera* (Cuban slang for "The Party") constructs a lively and exciting image of the street as a communal social space where everyone is welcome and everyone belongs in the celebration of music and dance of not only Cuban but Latin culture. The duo re-draws physical geographies by shifting geographical borders around an area constructed through a shared Latin musical and cultural identity stemming from the street as its home, thus, also claiming the streets of Miami as part of this new pan-Latin geography. In their recent release *En Mi Solar*, Timbalive praise the *solar* as the best place to learn to play music and to dance. In a very recent song "Cuba No Se Fue De Mi" ("Cuba Did Not Leave Me"), hip-hop trio Los Orishas speak about their experience as diaspora Cuban musicians in Paris. Even though they left the country, Cuba never left them, and their Orishas are still in the *solar* in Havana.



Figure 3: El Capitolio, Havana, 500 Anniversary (2019)

Photo: *DJpoll Iranis*

All these songs construct the street as the source of the musical education and inspiration in creating music regardless of the current location of the musicians or the genres they perform. They describe the street as the home of collective participation, sharing and happiness. This continuous search for a connection with the street is an individual artistic search for authenticity in a rapidly commercialising and globalising Cuban society. The street embodies “el sentimineto” (“the feeling/ sentiment”). The authentic Cuban musician, the *rumbero* from the street, has natural ability to convey “el sentimiento” to his audiences, creating the *sabrosura* (flavour) to which Pérez refers in his interview. It is this sentiment that is constructed as a key ingredient of Cuban music and why Cuban music has always had and must have “a lot of street” in it. “*El Sentimiento’s*” roots come from the rumba term *manana*, the feeling that music and musicians transmit through every cord, expression, movement, the touch of the instrument; it is a feeling which cannot be described but only experienced, but without which music is soulless. It is the feeling which *rumberos* transmit through their music. It is the way how every good, authentically Cuban musician, needs to play their instrument

and perform music, because manana, rumba, the street, the public has traditionally been the soul of Cuban music and culture.

Maintaining this connection with the borough is becoming more fictional than actual in the current period of transformation of the physical, social and economic aspects of the streets of Havana. The less touristic areas continue to fall apart, and this economic deprivation is limiting the possibilities for open, shared and regular social life on the streets of these boroughs. The areas undergoing renovation and new construction are facing a privatisation of the public domain where only economically rich Cubans can avail of the benefits creating a deeper divide within society (Nolen 2017). These locations are also not conducive to acting as homes for rumba or other street gatherings but more interested in Chanel type of events. Following this transformation of Cuba's socialist model of state ownership of enterprises and public properties in late 2011, privately owned music venues have been proliferating across Havana (Cooke 2016). Fábrica de Arte Cubano (FAC), King Bar, Corner Café, Bar Olala, Up-and-Down, and La Esencia, to name only a few, are now the homes of Cuban music and where musicians would like to perform to earn better and to further their careers. F.A.C has become a symbol of innovation and a cultural hub for more than just Cuban but also international culture. It was listed as one of the 2019 World's 100 Greatest Places by the Time Magazine.

The significant number of new clubs speaks of the growing popularity of these private initiatives and the cultural programmes they offer. All these venues are a striking departure from the traditional system of cultural centres, neighbourhood gatherings and other public spaces in Havana. Their modern interior in comparison to the ragged look of cultural centres, the Callejon de Hamel or el Palazio de la Rumba is supplemented by different musical repertoires and versatile audiences (Figure 4). Even the state-owned *casas de la musica* (music houses) have been run like private capitalist initiatives since the Special Period with high entry prices (\$15-\$20 for foreigners and \$5-\$8 for Cuban nationals), which while lower for Cubans are still prohibitive for the majority of the population, especially coupled with the expensive consumption charges. These music venues are where Cuban music and musicians live now and where they develop their musical careers and repertoires.

It is therefore that the great defence of the street as the authentic home of Cuban music is somewhat contradictory to Pérez's and Sandoval's reality of performance in Havana's most exclusive private venues. The closest to the street both have performed most recently was in *Parque Almendares* as part of the 2018 Havana World Music Festival, one of Havana's leading international events organised by the Alfonso family,

proprietors of F.A.C. Both musicians live in the wealthier boroughs of Havana, avoid public transport to navigate the city, and lead international careers with multiple tours outside of Cuba. Locally, they perform at the high-end venues in Havana - from private parties in expensive hotels such as the Riviera, to jazz club La Zorra y el Cuervo, Casa de la Musica in Miramar, and F.A.C amongst others. Even traditional *rumberos* such as New York-based percussionist Pedrito Martinez are now focusing on performances at the Lincoln Centre and Ronny Scott's.

While proud of the identification of “the street” as the original cradle of Cuban music, the reality of the musical profession today pushes Cuban musicians out of the public domain of the street and the neighbourhood, and into modern private venues, international locales, and more transnational careers than Cuban musicians have had for the past sixty years. They exist in constant friction between the nostalgia of the purity and authenticity of the streets, and the demands of a *sociocapitalist* and globalising Havana of which they are both taking advantage and looking to find their place in. In his work *Music and Urban Geography*, Krims (2007) articulates that in the current economic climate of neoliberal capitalism, the romanticisation of place as intimate and culturally authentic is a successful tourism marketing strategy. In the context of the rapidly changing socio-economic model of Cuba today, the association which musicians maintain with “the street” and the public as a place is romanticised, emotional, nostalgic, an imaginary, a memory, and a marketing strategy in a rapidly commercialising world, rather than a currently active physical locale of existence and performance.



Figure 4: Michelle Obama at Fábrica de Arte Cubano (2016)
Photo: *Cibercuba*

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