

# Looking Through a Prism: Questioning Cuban Music and Cuban Music Research<sup>1</sup>

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Representations of Cuban music in the Western world have been predominantly confined to dance genres or nostalgic love songs from before the 1959 revolution. More recently there has been a focus on genres such as reggae and hip-hop, suggesting that these are expressions of 'black identity' for an increasingly disempowered section of the Cuban population. However, many 'Afro-Cuban' contemporary singer-songwriters (trovadores) follow a long tradition of provocative commentary on society through a broad category of song known as 'trova'. As Cuban music has negotiated its way back into the global music industry, in spite of the U.S imposed economic blockade, trovadores are discussing what identity means in today's context.

This paper attempts to tease out ideas behind competing notions of identity. I will be drawing on discussion held with trovadores in Cuba, as well as ideas of race and colour in relation to the construction of identity. Edward Said's "politics of cultural representation" and the role of the media in "pacification [and] the depoliticization of ordinary life" will also be explored to develop an understanding of the problems associated with essentialising notions of blackness.

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"*Nueva trova* – a Castro supported Cuban singer-songwriter movement" (Party, 2003, p. 5).

"*nueva trova*, the one post-revolutionary musical tradition perceived by some cultural bureaucrats as challenging the state" (Fairley, 2004, p. 77).

"Cuba is the only country in which new song<sup>3</sup> is not protest music and where it is recognized and institutionally supported as an art form.... [It] was never a propaganda tool conceived by cultural planners; it was a spontaneous, uncoordinated effort on the part of young people to speak about the experience of growing up in a revolution" (Benmayor, 1981, pp. 12-13).

"*Las autoridades culturales de mi país jamás hicieron nada por nuestra generación artística. Lo hicimos todo nosotros*" (Milanés, 2000).

The cultural authorities of my country never did anything for our artistic generation. We did it all ourselves. [My translation]

The *nueva trova* was the name given to the music movement of singer-songwriters

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<sup>3</sup> Benmayor is referring to the broader context of Latin American New Song, of which *nueva trova* is a part.

which began in Cuba after the 1959 revolution. It was part of the broad *Nueva Canción* (or New Song Movement) of Latin America which also began during the 1960s; but because of its unique context the Cuban *nueva trova* provides an opportunity to understand not only the relationship between music and society in a socialist society, but also the way in which research itself is affected by different political contexts. Because of the varied and sometimes contradictory perspectives on the *nueva trova*, as can be seen in the examples at the beginning of this paper, I decided to call this paper 'looking through a prism'. Rather than seeing the whole, the multifaceted phenomenon of the *nueva trova*, during the research process I have often felt that I'm looking through only one face of a prism. These quotes are from a variety of sources; musicians and non-musicians, writers living in Cuba and others from outside of Cuba. However, a review of the literature covering the last few decades also shows some interesting changes in the perspectives that researchers have brought to an analysis of the Nueva Trova.

From its beginnings in the late 1960s to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the *nueva trova* was often discussed in relation to its links with the broader Latin American New Song Movement, incorporating discussions about concepts such as imperialism and the effects of colonisation. The ideas of Marx, an analysis of class and the means of production, were part of those theoretical discussions. Also, Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, in his pivotal book, *Open Veins of Latin America* (1973) describes the economic, political and social development of Central and South America, linking Cuba so fundamentally with the rest of Latin America.

Benmayor's quote identifies a difference between the *nueva trova* and other national expressions of the New Song Movement which in several cases remained as expressions of protest due to severe censorship under military regimes which were in power in several countries. Although the *nueva trova* shared a commitment to the new emerging Cuban society, the reaction by some authorities to these 'young upstarts' is alluded to in the two quotes by Fairley and Milanés. One of the founding members, Milanés looks back to the beginnings of the *nueva trova*, indicating the difficulties these musicians encountered at that time.

The New Song Movement as a formal organisation dissolved during the 1980s. The end of that decade also saw the collapse of Cuba's main trading partner, the Soviet Union, signalling what has often been discussed as the end of communism and the intense process of neo-liberal economic globalisation. Cuba's subsequent struggle for survival and its political and economic isolation throughout the decade of the 1990s was termed the Special Period by the government. As if to underscore this isolation, literature on the *nueva trova* seems to have shifted to an almost exclusive focus on the internal relationship between the *nueva trova* and the Cuban authorities, and it becomes increasingly common to read more polarised discussions about the *nueva trova* as either a mouthpiece for the revolution or as a thorn in the government's side (see Party's quote above).

As Cuba itself became more politically isolated so too was there an increasing scrutiny of the *nueva trova* to see on which side they stood. In the last 10-15 years theoretical support for that perspective has included Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "a minor literature" to demonstrate this internal conflict and the idea of the

*trovadores*<sup>4</sup> “re-territorializing spaces”.<sup>5</sup> Fairley’s quote, by contrast, allows for an interpretation of the *nueva trova* as a more autonomous phenomenon. From this selection of quotes then, we can also see how analyses of the *nueva trova* can themselves be politicized.

The impetus for my research has been to understand how the trovador sees their role and the way in which artistic expression occurs, develops and changes in the Cuban socialist context. However, this paper also emerges from the need to understand the reasons for conflicting interpretations of the *nueva trova* found in a review of the literature. Why does my own research experience seem at odds with some of these points of view? This has made me step back a little, re-think what it is to research Cuban music and consider how my own perspectives and experiences shape this story.

### **The significance of the *nueva trova***

Fairley (2004) has noted

“the uniqueness of the *nueva trova* is that it is a music that has fought for and gained the space to express the inner worlds of feeling and lived experience within the revolution... this music has thrived in a country that is the only place in the world to have a revolutionary government for more than forty years during which North America has maintained an economic embargo...[and] economically Cuba is outside the direct sphere of influence of the World Bank (through which many countries are tied to North American policies in the late twentieth to early twenty-first century)” (p. 78).

The phenomenon of the *nueva trova* occurred in what was essentially a new context, that is, within a country which was rebuilding itself, making itself new, rejecting the political and economic framework of pre-1959 to establish a reorganisation of its society along socialist ideas. There were also significant social effects that accompanied the Cuban revolution; one of those was the influence of Che Guevara (1967) and his concept of ‘*el hombre nuevo*’, ‘the new man’ or the new kind of person that would develop along with this new society (p. 126). The *nueva trova* embraced these possibilities with a more conscious understanding of the active role of song in Cuban culture.

My research draws on interviews with Cuban *trovadores* conducted in 2001 and an analysis of their songs over the long trajectory of the *nueva trova*. I have focused on expressions of contestation and social relevance, and the ways in which the *trovadores* interpret their lived experiences of the Cuban revolution through music. Contestation and social relevance are common themes in ethnomusicological research but Cuba’s socialist context provides an opportunity to examine the relationship of these themes in different ways. My research combines the fields of ethnomusicology, Latin American studies, cultural studies and political science. Because of its interdisciplinary nature I also draw on theoretical explanations from these areas to help understand the phenomenon of the *nueva trova*.

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<sup>4</sup> *Trovador* is usually translated as *troubadour*, however the particular historical context in which the concept of the troubadour has been adapted and developed in Latin America is one which is receiving ongoing research.

<sup>5</sup> See Lauren Shaw’s thesis *La Nueva Trova Cubana: Un a poética y política menor*, 2001, where she uses the concept of Deleuze and Guattari’s “minor literature” to describe the *nueva trova*’s position in relation to the Cuban authorities.

Some of the *trovadores* I interviewed for this project I first met when I went to Cuba in 1996. Attending performances and public discussions I met several *trovadores*, but it was as a singer-songwriter myself that facilitated these meetings. I returned in 2001 for music study and to investigate the current situation of the *nueva trova*. Each of those visits lasted three months and included the opportunity to see many *trova* concerts, noting the kinds of venues and activities where this music was heard. Participating in shared public performances as well as informal ‘descargas’ after performances or at parties also provided an opportunity for me to hear their perspectives on the place of *trova* in Cuba, the creative process, influences, and its intersection with everyday lived experience. Ethnomusicologists Feld and Keil (1994) focus on the “the nature of the communication process” and argue that: “Music has a fundamentally social life” (p. 77). Keil underlines this importance by seeing “music as a creative act rather than as an object”. He voices both an “ambivalence and concern about media commodification”, prompting us to “remember that outside the West, musical traditions are almost exclusively performance traditions” (p. 17-18).

Cuba has a long history of *trovadores* and since its beginnings the *trova*, essentially a singer/poet, historically accompanied with a guitar, in its role as social commentator, has reflected life in Cuba. With the *nueva trova* (‘new’ *trova*) these musicians continued that role with a much more conscious awareness, giving perspectives on Cuban life, but in this case, through their songs, we can see the unfolding story of the Cuban revolution. Like the broader New Song Movement, it was characterised by a sense of internationalism, a rejection of imperialism, and also a rejection of commercialisation of their work. Another characteristic of the *nueva trova* is that, while the guitar has been, and continues to be, central to their songwriting, they have embraced a diversity of music influences from traditional Cuban music and overseas influences. So musically speaking, a study of the *nueva trova* does not fit comfortably into an analysis along musical style or genre alone.

When the *nueva trova* began Cuban musicians sought to convey their ideas as active participants in the reorganisation of their society, expressing their ideas through song. The Cuban and world situation has changed considerably since the 1960s and the *nueva trova*’s ideas and responses to their times have also changed, but essentially their role has not.

When I returned to Cuba in 2001 I witnessed many changes in the country, but essentially the *trovadores* saw their work as continuing to be contemporary, often provocative and also musically innovative. For several generations now the *trovadores* have consistently taken up the role so clearly outlined by Alexis Méndez:

*“Siempre la trova ha estado en la vanguardia de renovar la canción. Eso es una de las cosas que yo veo, características que unen a los trovadores: renovación de la canción, la inconformidad con el mundo que le rodea. Eso, para mí, es otra característica de los trovadores, y la experimentación... Siempre está el texto, el interés por decir algo, por poner algo en evidencia, algo por señalar, algo interesante de lo que me rodea, por criticar también o por recrear, por fabular sobre las realidades, sobre las cosas que me rodean y las cosas que conozco”*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Excerpt from conversation with author in 2001, Havana.

The *trova* has always been in the forefront of recreating song. It's one of the things that I see, characteristics that unite the *trovadores*, a renovation of song, the lack of conformity with the world around ... That, for me, is another characteristic of the *trovador*, and experimentation ... There's always the text, the interest in saying something, to make something evident, to signal something, something interesting around me, to criticise also or to recreate, to invent realities about the things that surround me and the things that I know. [My translation]

While *trovadores* today continue to give voice to their experiences of life within Cuba's socialist system, they are also experiencing the friction created as Cuba seeks to maintain its socialist framework while also working within the increasingly neoliberal globalised market context. In the following example Gerardo Alfonso incorporates several musical features, to enhance the story in his song *Suave, Suave* (Easy, Easy). The song highlights the often problematic interaction between music and tourism. Music has been a big attraction in Cuba's growing tourist economy but it is a complex interaction that has received regular investigation in *trovador* songs. *Suave, Suave* begins with the sound of laughter, voices and drumming. It is the sound of *rumba*, a music style identified particularly with black Cubans and which has been a growing attracting also for foreign visitors to the country. The traveller quickly approaches, without her husband, and eagerly inquires about drum lessons. The story continues and a mix of images is complemented by the incorporation of strong brass lines as the songs moves to a popular *salsa* dance style. The playful interplay between styles also suggests the overwhelming mix of images and sounds that the visitor is trying so anxiously to assimilate; but while the song pokes fun at the tourist, the commercial approach of seeing music as a commodity is one that also affects the *trovadores*.

### ***Suave, Suave***

Gerardo Alfonso

*Una sueca vino al país*

*A aprender la rumba como se toca aquí*

*Su marido fue al malecón*

*A comprar tabacos y botellas de ron en la Habana todo se intenta, lo que no se puede se inventa...*

*Y en un patio descubrió un negrón tocando tambor, con los brazos fuertes como de un gladiador...*

*Ella preguntó cuando iba a empezar*

*Cuánto costaría un curso especial, si compra un tambor o se puede usar el que oyó primero*

*“suave suave” dijo el rumbero “la cosa es clara, aquí no todo cuesta dinero*

### **Easy Easy**

A Swedish woman came to the country to learn how the rumba is played here.

Her husband went to the Malecón to buy cigars and rum,

In Havana you try everything, what you can't you invent...

On a patio she discovered a big black man playing drums, with strong arms like a gladiator...

She asked when she could start, how much was it for a special course, if she has to buy a drum or could she use the one she heard.

“Easy, easy” said the rumbero [rumba musician], “one thing is sure, not everything here costs money.”

### **Cuban music contexts**

Given the clear role that *trovadores* see for themselves, why do conflicting accounts of the *nueva trova* persist in the literature? One of the reasons I believe is to be found by looking at the factors affecting research itself. Alexis describes the *trovador* as

someone who demonstrates a “lack of conformity with the world around” and who can “criticise”, “recreate” and “invent realities”. Writer Arundhati Roy (2002) believes that artists “can make the connections, ...make the impalpable palpable, the intangible tangible, the invisible visible and the inevitable evitable” (p. 191). Can we also take up this role as researchers? I’d like to make the invisible visible by describing the Cuban context through an early experience I had learning music in Cuba.

### **Silvio’s book**

My twice weekly music lessons with Silvio Tarin were held at his home because the music school was undergoing renovations. He lived not far from Plaza de la Revolución. His house was filled with instruments. I’d been learning about Cuban guitar styles—a *son*, a *guajira*— and had been really enjoying my lessons. I was looking forward to a new piece. One afternoon in the middle of a lesson Silvio left the room and returned, smiling proudly, with a large, thick book. When he opened it I saw that it was filled with Cuban songs. Every line of the staff, every page was ruled by hand, each note was carefully handwritten. It represented years of work and that afternoon it was my turn to copy one song into my own book.

It was not only a lack of access to photocopying facilities, but also a shortage of paper and pencils, rubbers, guitar strings and parts for instrument repairs, that seemed to create a long row of obstacles for someone used to a relatively steady supply of these resources. Music performances involved a different set of problems. Transporting instruments and amplifiers to venues on the back of a bicycle, dealing with an occasional electric shock on stage due to malfunctioning equipment, were also part of the reality for working Cuban musicians that I witnessed. The reason for this narrative was to “make visible” the daily reality of producing music in Cuba, but the context for research also needs to be made visible.

### **Research contexts**

One of the difficulties for people living outside of Cuba, in researching not only the *nueva trova* but many aspects of Cuban life, is getting access to Cuban perspectives on an issue. Apart from doing fieldwork and getting primary information first hand, other sources of information can be very difficult to obtain. This skews perspectives of foreign researchers who have little access to what Cubans have to say about their own situation. Throughout my review of the literature I have found only one reference to the difficulty of accessing Cuban academic work, but this was not directly related to my topic. In an education journal in 2001 Denise Blum wrote: “The reasons for fewer submissions and fewer publications from less developed countries, like Cuba, are understandable.”<sup>7</sup> She describes the process of including an article on Cuban education in a U.S. journal and refers to the shortage of resources such as telephones and computers. She describes the impediments to collaborative work between the U.S. and Cuba, such as the difficulties of communicating with authors; emailing articles, editing, proofing, layout, even the difficulty of transporting hard copies of documents due to petrol shortages and transport difficulties. Blum’s description of the difficulties in obtaining Cuban perspectives alerts us to the possible effects on research itself.

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<sup>7</sup> Denise Blum, “The Cuban way: the making of a very special issue”, *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 2001, Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 103

Blum's concerns are reflected in my own experiences. Accessing journals, either hard copies or online, is central to gauging the breadth and diversity of research and analysis. However accessing journals published in Cuba presents a major obstacle. With no direct access through the university itself<sup>8</sup>, it is necessary to investigate other options, such as individual subscriptions. Finding out what academic publications from Cuba are produced, as well as accessing the appropriate organisations within Cuba, is not straight forward either. This is not simply a matter of scarcity of resources in a developing country. An example of this is Microsoft's own reflection of the US government's position on Cuba. Microsoft does not have offices in Cuba and, in relation to a program which was being developed in 2003, senior vice president, Craig Mundie, while outlining the many advantages of the program, also added: "There are a handful of countries that are subject to U.S. trade embargoes -- Cuba, for example, or Iraq -- so those nations aren't eligible".<sup>9</sup> The overt exclusion of Cuba from using these technologies ensures that Cuba remains in the eyes of much of the world, and in Roy's terminology, "invisible".

As a researcher how is it possible to understand the multifaceted nature of the *nueva trova* when the capacity to investigate takes place within such a politicised climate? The combination of factors that affect research itself help put into context ethnomusicologist, Robin Moore's comment that: "Despite its broad impact throughout the hemisphere, surprisingly little of substance has been written about the *nueva trova*, the music most associated with Cuban socialist revolution" (2003, p. 1). Edward Said (1993) proposes: "I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history, but authors are, I also believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure" (p. xxiv). This argument suggests to me both a need to recognise the subjective researcher perspective as well as an understanding of the social, political and economic framework in which research is undertaken.

## Conclusions

Over the decades the *trovadores* have reflected and analysed their everyday lived experiences through song. The *nueva trova* began in a unique context which led to a new consciousness of their role as social commentators. From outside the country they have often been viewed as supporters for, or critics of, the Cuban government. Yet while either viewpoint may be true at any particular moment, reducing the focus to a political positioning alone does not capture the breadth and richness of their artistic work. Does the act of politically positioning the *nueva trova* simply mask the position of the researcher? In positioning my own research in relation to others I have been stimulated to think about the methods, motivations and contexts that shape my research experiences. Given the continuing conflict between the U.S. and Cuban governments, research is likely to remain highly politicised for some time to come. However in understanding this highly politicised context there is a possibility to look for new approaches to investigating the relationship between music, society and artistic expression.

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<sup>8</sup> The University of Queensland, through its online journal subscription, has very limited links to Cuban journal publications. There are no direct links to any Cuban culture and arts journals.

<sup>9</sup> Retrieved January 31, 2006, from <http://www.google.com.au/intl/en/profile.html>,

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