

## CULTURAL CHANGE AND CONTINUUM ACROSS THE SCHISM OF THE SPECIAL PERIOD

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My research focuses on individual and collective identity construction in contemporary Cuban music making. Of primary interest to me is the issue of the so-called ‘Special Period’ of the 1990s, and how contemporary musicians are attempting to re-forge cultural links from Cuba’s past, through the ‘event’, to borrow a term from Alain Badiou, of the Special Period and into the present day. Within the Cuban context, Badiou’s concept of the event ‘compel[ing] the subject to invent a new way of being’ (2001:42) is most commonly reserved for descriptions of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 (the accompanying notion of ‘fidelity’ to the event taking on a particularly pertinent nuance in light of Cuba’s charismatic leader); however, much of the rhetoric now surrounding the Special Period has sought to define it in similarly epochal terms.

Whilst the significant changes wrought by this period upon all facets of Cuban life cannot be ignored, Many Cuban musicians raised in this ‘evental’ period are attempting to reconnect cultural links across the supposed schism; renegotiating the often narrow definitions of what constitutes Cuban music by both looking outside the island for influence, but also reaching back into Cuba’s history to rekindle and restate elements that have been written out of the ‘official’, politically motivated narrative of what constitutes ‘Cubanness’.

The Special Period is the name given to the epoch in Cuba’s history immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This global political event had devastating consequences within Cuba, as the economy –so dependent on Soviet subsidised trade and imported goods- simply disintegrated. The result was a number of years of near-famine and scarcity throughout the 1990s that permeated the lives of all Cubans.

Whilst the economic costs of the Special Period were (and still are) profound, as significant have been the social ramifications of Castro’s numerous contingency plans. The opening up of the island to tourism (albeit still forbidden to US citizens), a reintroduction of a dollar economy –effectively creating a two-tier monetary system– and negotiations with foreign businesses in the construction of tourist-only hotels (called joint ventures) all undermined the ideological rigidity of the Cuban government, leading Castro to concede: “today we cannot speak of the pure, ideal, perfect socialism of which we dream because life forces us into concessions” (Perez 2006:305 quoted from Castro 1993).

Perhaps the Special Period’s most damaging and long lasting effect was the mass migration of Cubans throughout the 1990s. By hook or by crook –often on homemade rafts literally made from the corrugated iron and furniture from people’s homes– scores of Cubans fled their nation in search of a life filled with more opportunity and less struggle. The traumatic upshot has been the creation of a diasporic generation of Cubans. It is no exaggeration to say that every person living within Cuba knows someone who has left the island illegally. The contemporary pertinence of the Special Period is perhaps best summed up by Louis Perez:

“The years of the Special Period will no doubt be remembered as one of those temporal divides by which people may experience the momentous transitions of a historical epoch. The Special Period has served to demarcate the life of a generation, to persist hereafter as the

reference point by which people often make those profoundly personal distinctions about their lives as “before” and “after”” (2006:xi)

When assessing the music created in the 1990s in Cuba, it is tempting to follow Perez’s rhetoric of transition and division. Indeed, there is much to support such a notion. The 1990’s saw a mushrooming in the popularity of hip-hop and numerous forms of rock music.

Artists such as Carlos Varela and Pedro Luis Ferrer, among others, began to inject a rich vein of pointed, if poetic and allegorical, social commentary and outright criticism of the regime into their compositions. Other musicians began to look outside the hegemonic definitions of ‘Cuban music’ as an insular, isolated, African-derived, and ultimately homogenous whole. Antoni Kapcia to suggest that Cuban culture in the Special Period became “an archipelago of individualism” (2005:191) as the “already weaker sense of community disintegrated in the face of an individual search for survival” (2005:182).

Whilst the Special Period has been treated as a dividing line in all facets of Cuban life, the case study I would like to now introduce –a punk band formed at the tail end of the Special Period– are, I believe, attempting to reach back through that schism to reconnect elements from their past to create a contemporary identity both for themselves as individuals, but also for their diasporic generation; affording them a voice which, as lead singer Gorki Águila claims, “people are too frightened to use”.

Porno Para Ricardo are a band whose aesthetic is uncompromisingly direct and, musically speaking, a far cry from, to quote Cuban academic Mario Masvidal, “the stereotype of Cuban music we all have in our head; mambo, son and cha-cha” (Masvidal 2007). Yet to label them as a ‘clean break’ culturally in a ‘new Cuba’ is to deny the band the ownership they feel towards Cuba’s musical history. For Porno Para Ricardo, whilst adopting and adapting a distinctly ‘foreign’ genre of music to express themselves, are simultaneously negotiating their place within the almost hagiographical canon of ‘Cuban Greats’. Porno Para Ricardo vociferously stakes a claim to the title of inheritors of Cuba’s musical legacy and they are adamant that their music be considered as Cuban.

Throughout the band’s oeuvre, one can detect this paradoxical symbiosis of schism and continuum; of repetition and creation; a desire to remember and anger that demands to forget. As a case study here, I will briefly examine the band’s treatment of Cuba’s Soviet Russian past.

It is perhaps unsurprising that during the Special Period, the Cuban government sought to distance them from the spectre of the Soviet Union. In modern-day Cuba, the myriad Lada and Moskovitch cars negotiating the minefields of pot holes on Cuba’s roads are one of the only reminders of the omnipotence ‘Russia’ once had in Cuba. Most pointedly, the cultural imports from Russia seem to have been written out of the official discourse of permissible influential elements for ‘authentic Cubanness’. In Porno Para Ricardo’s music, there is an insistence to remember these often very personal influences and to write them back into the narrative; in essence, to reconnect a continuum that bridges the Special Period. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their anarchic, yet strangely tender, cover version of the opening song from a Soviet cartoon called ‘The Musicians of Bremen<sup>2</sup>.’

<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.freemuse.org/sw16482.asp>>

<sup>2</sup> This song appears on Porno Para Ricardo’s first album ‘*Rock Para Las Masas... Carnicas*’. The song can also be heard via the band’s website: <<http://www.pornopararicardo.org>>

Porno Para Ricardo are evidently forging a connection with their own personal past –the song is clearly a remembrance from childhood, and it is intended to puncture the seriousness of the status of ‘professional musician’– a status which has a particular pertinence within Cuba’s bureaucratic and strictly controlled society. Yet there is a more general political message here too. The invocation of the Russian lessons at school (the band can be seen wearing school uniforms in the video), the reference to Russian cartoons– as familiar to 30-something-year-old Cubans as to Eastern Europeans of the same generation. The band is insisting that this portion of their cultural history be remembered, and they are disallowing the politically motivated desire to remove it from the collective consciousness by insisting upon re-remembering.

An act, which made physical this dichotomy between breaking from and reconnecting with a past, was Águila’s penchant for destroying Russian guitars as part of the bands live act. Contemptibly, because of the strict censorship visited upon the band by the state, Porno Para Ricardo are no longer permitted to perform live, so this most visceral act is no longer allowed to the band. However, Águila expressed his opinion on the subject in a recent interview:

“The most enjoyable part [of playing live] was the breaking of guitars because we gave a meaning to breaking a guitar – that is a Russian guitar. In rock music you break a guitar with the intention of an exorcism, or as a catharsis, but we gave it a local meaning for our country that is to break with Russian colonialism” (Interview with author, May 2010).

Laura García Freyre has stated that the group are “rejecting the imposition of Soviet culture in Cuba” and that the act of destroying a Russian guitar was “a way to break with the past” (2008:550). This is certainly crucial when addressing the issue. But when analysing the band’s continued use of Russian cultural references, the picture becomes more complex that the notion of ‘breaking with the past’ to ‘create something new’.



*Figure 1. PPR hammer and sickle logo*

To me, destroying a guitar on stage in Cuba takes on a more localised narrative. In a society where even today the ‘everyday’ is about the all-pervading ‘make-do-and-mend’ mentality and the acquisition of even the most basic of goods often requires undue effort (and often illegal bartering), Águila’s almost wanton destruction of an electronic appliance (night after night) forces the audience to confront the continued legacy of politically motivated trading –both

Soviet subsidies now lost, and US goods still forbidden (as significant as the destroyed Russian guitar is the revered Fender Jaguar Águila uses). The band are reemphasising the continuing dearth of consumer goods in the act of destruction– recognising that even after the dismantling of the Soviet Union, many aspects of Cuban life continue unabated.

So running parallel to Garcia Freyre's assertion of rejecting the imposition of Soviet culture is the equally important point that the band are recognising that it has formed an integral part of their cultural landscape and as such cannot simply be excised. They are both breaking from the past whilst simultaneously reminding their audience of the contemporary significance of this same past.

As means of a conclusion, I present the contradictory and highly contentious 'band' (in both senses of the word) logo.

<PPR hammer and sickle logo>

Here we see a radical take on the Soviet hammer and sickle motif that carries with it a multitude of somewhat juxtapositional attitudes. On the one hand it is offensive and deliberately shocking; on the other it is obviously humorous and designed to provoke a laugh. On the one hand, it appears to be a bold political statement of Soviet control over Cuba; on the other it seems flippant – almost juvenile – a crude scribble in the back of a school exercise book. On the one hand it serves to denigrate the legacy of Soviet presence in Cuba; on the other it maintains it by reinforcing its lasting presence and significance within Cuba as a nation, and within the lives of the band members as individuals (and of their generation).

In short, this symbol represents a schism in that it reminds the viewer that the Soviet Union no longer exists, and that its dissolution represents a new epoch in Cuba's history. However, it simultaneously implores the viewer to remember the significant impact Soviet culture had upon this diasporic generation of Cubans; that one may not (must not) disallow these influences –good or bad– or render them illegitimate in the discourse surrounding the concept of Cubanness –especially not for top-down, politically motivated reasons such as a desire to portray Cubans as a unified group, 'speaking with one voice'.

In their treatment of Russianness, and in elements too multifarious to discuss here, Porno Para Ricardo are both breaking from and reusing their past to renegotiate their position – and the position of 'Cubanness' in the present.

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