



Jane Cornwell finds out about a residency bringing the popular Cuban sounds of *timba* to London. “February was a masterclass in Cuban genres... The crowd were going crazy”, she hears

It's the last Sunday of the month in Brick Lane, London, and a buoyant crowd at Juju's Bar & Stage is dancing as one, hands in the air, on hips, in partner hold. It's winter outside, but the vibe is tropical, what with an orchestra of local Cuban musicians playing the joyously aggressive fusion music known as *timba* and a special guest Cuban star vocalist flown in from Europe to front them.

“The Latin dance community in London has been craving live music”, says Latin Grammy-winning percussionist Hammadi Rencurrell Valdes, musical director of Orquesta Sambroso, a ten-plus outfit of London-based Cuban (and Cuban-adjacent) virtuosos newly formed to back a series of celebrated international singers in the manner, and with the repertoire, to which they're accustomed. “Finally, we have a space where London's top Cuban musicians get to play the music that we Cubans actually listen to, and people will hear the songs performed live”, adds Valdes.

London has long been a hub for Cuban music. The seeds for the Buena Vista Social Club were sown in the mid-90s at the Camden home of (producer/ethnomusicologist) Lucy Durán, then gestated by Nick Gold's World Circuit Records. Over the decades, as increasing numbers of largely conservatoire-trained Cuban musicians settled in the capital (particularly after Virgin Atlantic started flying from London to Havana in 2005, enabling many a cross-cultural liaison) and as the Buena Vista effect packed out salsa classes in basement clubs and back rooms in pubs, so came a wealth of bands playing *son*, *danzón* and *chachachá* straight from BVSC's sepia-tinted playbook.

Nevertheless, this wasn't what Cubans were listening to, either at home or in their new places of residence. Alongside

the bouncing, bass-heavy reggaeton, the music they loved most was *timba*, the modern salsa style piloted in the 1990s by the country's '*timba brava*' generation, which included Bamboleo, Issac Delgado and NG La Banda, Giraldo Piloto y Klimax and the late Cesar 'Pupy' Pedrosó and his group Pupy y Los Que Son Son. A fast-paced, rhythmically complex synthesis of funk, reggaeton, Cuban son and Afro-Cuban rumba, *timba* came accompanied by casino or *despeloté* (chaos) partner dancing – a blur of angled elbows and fleet footwork.

Which is how *salseros* at Juju's have danced since 2016, when *conguero* Oreste 'Sambroso' Noda Fernandez (Ska Cubano, Jazz Jamaica, Sambroso All Stars) founded a weekly event called *Cuban Sundays* featuring tunes and videos spun by London-based Cuban DJs, Flecha and Javier 'La Maquina' de Cuba. Avuncular and charismatic, Noda was already the stuff of legend, thanks to the all-night jams he hosted at a warehouse space in east London in the early 2010s (a cultural phenomenon akin to the 1970s New York loft scene) so mythical that visiting A-listers Los Van Van sought it out, and the weekly live music events he went on to promote at The Forge in Camden.

The bands that played at the latter comprised the *crème de la crème* of UK-based Cuban singers and instrumentalists, alongside such stellar players as award-winning Bangladeshi-born pianist/composer Kishon Khan, founder of Funkiwala Records, professor of practice at SOAS and a man whose *montunos* burn fiery trails along his keyboard. Most were smallish configurations, with the same faces crossing over, and for a while, these groups performed at Juju's too, until – even with door splits – they became financially untenable.

Alcibiades Durruthy López performing at *Cuban Sundays* – Live Music Series in February

Timba bands featuring the customary ten or more players sometimes came through the capital. Promoters Como No, hosts of the La Linea Latin Music Festival, brought big guns including the evergreen Los Van Van, as well as singer/trumpeter Alexander Abreu and his 16-piece Havana D'Primera orchestra to the Electric Brixton (the latter will be there again on June 26). But for the most part, the UK became too prohibitive to play post-Brexit. Timba obsessives were forced to travel to salsa congresses in Europe to see their heroes live, for though London was a Mecca for Cuban instrumentalists, the big-name Cuban singers tended to relocate to France, Italy or Spain.

Beset by requests to programme live timba music at Juju's, "without anyone realising the huge costs and complicated visa issues involved in bringing in so many people", Noda hit on a solution. Why not create a house orchestra of British Cuban virtuosos, rehearsed and ready to play the repertoire of a Cuban singer, brought in especially for a one-off performance?

Welcome, then, *Cuban Sundays – Live Music Series*, a series of seven monthly live music events held on the last Sunday of each month, which kicked off last December with the Cifuentes (central Cuba)-born, Barcelona-based timba star, *cantor* and *tres* player Mixel Cabrera – who further thrilled an ecstatic crowd by leaping off the stage to lead a formation dance. January got steamy with Havana-born, Paris-based vocalist Angel Yos, a Cubadisco-award winner with a clutch of solo albums to his name; February's session featured the Guantanamo-born, Barca-based *sonero*/guitarist Alcibiades Durruthy López.

"That whole February session was a masterclass in Cuban genres", says Kishon Khan, a classically trained pianist who, on graduating from the University of East Anglia, spent several years living in Cuba and has long engaged in cross-cultural musical dialogues via bands such as [Cuban-Bangladeshi-Afrobeat outfit] Lokkhi Terra and others helmed by UK-based Afrobeat king Dele Sosimi. "Because Alcibiades is a *sonero* and not a *timbero*, we went from playing tunes like 'Silencio' [the 1932 *bolero* revived by Buena Vista's Ibrahim Ferrer & Omara Portuondo], a duet between Alcibiades and [flautist/singer] Ludys Hernandez to *son montuno* and some real hardcore timba... The band was beaming. The crowd were going crazy. The whole thing was pure joy", beams Kishon.

The March edition featured Milan-based Dayan Carrera Fernández, a Cuban singer known for his work with Pupy and for the internationally feted *Havana Meets Kingston* project, the subject of a 2018 BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall. It's hoped that the last Sunday of April will welcome Laraine Cañizares, frontwoman of Klimax, that May will feature *salsa y tropical* legend Teddy Fuentes of Bumbata,

and June and July will bring similarly special guests. Though, much of this is down to the goodwill and processing speeds of UK Visas and Immigration.

The hoops through which UK promoters of Cuban music must jump to obtain a

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visitor's visa for even one Cuban artist often feel interminable. Nevertheless, the creation of Orquesta Sambroso (instigated by Noda's Sambroso Sambroso and Turns, a company that develops projects with diasporic musical communities) is not just a deft way to subvert such needless bureaucracy. It's a platform designed to showcase the wealth of Cuban musical talent in London: bassist Frank Portuondo; conguero Oscar Martinez; on *timbales*, Hammadi Rencurrell Valdes, who won a Latin Grammy for his work on timba pioneer Chucho Valdés' 2003 album, *New Conceptions*.

Most of the above Cuban musicians – alongside others on trumpets and trombones, cowbells and percussion – are products of the island's extensive music education system, which offers free access to conservatoires and extracurricular activities that turn young students into skilled professionals. Cuban-adjacent musicians, such as Gaz Buckland, on a second set of keyboards opposite Kishon Khan, and Will Fry on congas, have learned by playing in situ; younger rising star Cubans such as *sonero* Jorge Michel Caminero – on backing vocals with Ludys Hernandez – are honing their skills on the job.

"When these players work with the calibre of singers we are bringing in, they have to step up. They can't help but get even better than they already are", says Oreste Noda, the smiling face of London's Cuban community, whose career trajectory (self-taught on trombone and congas at home in rumba-drenched Matanzas then in the tourist hotels of Varadero, he is one of the finest congueros and most in-demand session players across a host of genres) is as colourful as the man himself (by way of example, 'Sambroso', a play on the Spanish 'sabroso' or 'tasty', is his idiosyncratic creation).

"Rehearsing the repertoire of each singer before they arrive is a different kind of pressure", he continues of a project in which fair pay for all is enabled by a £15 door fee and funding from Arts Council England. "But they are nailing it each time, and it is incredible to see."

It's hoped there will be an Orquesta Sambroso album down the track, with covers and new compositions penned in collaboration with Giraldo Piloto and composer Wilfrido Fernandez. And after the smash hit first season of the series (with another three sessions still to come), there will be a season two in 2026.

Por que no? The popularity of timba and modern salsa music is at an all-time high. From its base at Juju's Bar & Stage, *Cuban Sundays – Live Music Series* seems to signal the start of a new London-generated Cuban music wave.

"London is the international capital of music", says Valdes. "So many international music movements have started here. So, it's from London that we are unleashing Cuban timba on the world." ♦

+ *Cuban Sundays – Live Music Series* takes place on the last Sunday of each month at Juju's Bar & Stage, Ely's Yard, 15 Hanbury St, London E1 6QR

Mixel Cabrera
& Orquesta
Sambroso at
December's
debut event

