

El tosco, la timba and la banda

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“If you eat crab, you end up doing the crabwalk.” [Quien come cangrejo camina pa’ tras]: An interview with Cuban popular musician José Luis Cortés, leader of NG La Banda.

I was thinking about doing a radio show, so I approached José Luis Cortés, *El Tosco*. At that time I was working at the *Habana Radio* station and I got really motivated by the idea of creating a project that would explore the multiple meanings of “Cuban-ness,” (what was quintessentially Cuban in the ideas of several well known cultural personalities). *El Tosco* is a controversial figure who in the 1990s became the center of criticism by several Cuban media outlets. Some of the critical articles were: “Demasiada salsa” [Too much *salsa*], “Juventud Rebelde”; “Están matando la música” [They’re killing the music], “El Caimán Barbudo”; as well as critical articles by the majority of popular music critics¹. They said he was tasteless, low class and vulgar. They talked about his eccentricity and

on-stage aggressivity; the poor quality of his lyrics; and other, non-musical things.

The truth is that the mastery of the members of *NG La Banda* and its leader, *El Tosco* put a new vibe into our music. They were responsible for the *boom* of the nineties, pioneers of so-called Cuban *timba*, an extraordinarily important musical movement². “Échale Limón” and “La Bruja” would become symbols of it. These songs were played at *La Tropical -Salón Rosado Benny Moré* [the Benny Moré Pink Room which was located in a dance plaza in the Municipality of Playa] -or at just about any neighborhood party during that decade. These symbols had an enormous influence on new generations of musicians in Cuba. The urban account of José Luis Cortés and his song “Échale Limón” is considered by some specialists to be



equal to *Siembra*, the LP anthology by Willie Colón and Rubén Blades.

How did José Luis Cortés become a flute player?

“I wanted to learn to play the violin, but didn’t have the money and stuff. My fingers were too short and a little stiff, so they gave me the boot, as I call it, and I was about to leave the performing arts school anyway. I didn’t like

the scene there anymore. I’m from the Condado - that’s my hood. I’m from the streets; from rumbling and from the blade; from blood, and weed, and that whole scene associated with *bembé* parties³. Sometimes I would get to school and see a guy reciting a monologue in front of a plant... I was assigned a dorm room across from the dramatic arts building... It was crazy; I didn’t understand that stuff. For me, seeing a classical male dancer was like seeing a faggot—it was tough for me.

Then Pedroso, whose word was like magic—at a time when that was the best thing you could have going for you—, laughed and said: ‘Don’t quit, the flute is a lot of fun.’ I thought about the way Richard Egües played it, a black wooden flute. Later, my teacher, Emilio Mayo, would bring bread sticks, a hamburger snack and a ham sandwich to class. Whoever played best got to take home the ham sandwich, so I started going for the ham sandwich. I started to work at it and fell in love with the instrument.

I wanted to become a violinist because in Santa Clara I would see them at the charanga parties; all dressed up; rocking with personality⁴. But I’m glad I decided not to study the violin.”

How do you handle both your responsibility as the leader of NG La Banda as well as a flute soloist?

“The flute is the instrument of the gods. I start to practice outside, on the terrace, and little birds come and perch, to listen. The sound has a spiritual quality to it, something heavenly. Once you have actually internalized the voice and harmony of a particular instrument, giving a concert becomes quite easy for you. You can practice a little bit anywhere and memorize some pieces, but when you’re going to do something that requires more professionalism, you need to stop and take notice of what you’re about to do. If I’m going to do a concert with Jorge Luis Pratts, I have to spend four months really practicing. I can’t show up if I haven’t prepared enough.”

How was NG La Banda born?

“The founders of *NG La Banda* used to play with *Irakere*: Carlos Averhoff, Germán Velazco, Juan Munguía, José Miguel “El Greco” and I. Our brass section was very strong and we

began to be used for special recordings. We put out more than ten albums of instrumental music, such as: *Abriendo el ciclo*; *Através del ciclo*; *Siglo I N.E.*; and *Siglo II N.E.* We recorded the album *Solamente con Amor*, with which Carlos Averhoff won an award... José Miguel’s *Ésta es mi mecánica*; Juan Munguía’s *Carta de estilo*;... we did lots of things... [including] Mayra Caridad Valdés’s album, too. After establishing this track record, people started to take an interest in what was happening with the new music. In a certain sense, those albums established the concept from which *NG La Banda* emerged.

Then there was conflict within *Irakere*, because those who were in charge did not agree with the making of those recordings. Chucho Valdés got a little salty because of that, so we decided to take our brass section and leave. That’s how we later formed another group, and thank God we were [finally] able to start doing the work we wanted to do.”

Why New Generation (NG)?

“*NG La Banda* got its name because it was new music that a new generation of musicians was making. The name has a lot to do with the work of *NG*, because *NG* is the group that started the whole movement called *timba Cubana*.”

What do you think about the dissemination of popular music on Cuban radio and TV?

“We’re the ones who have had the most problems with radio. I, myself, have been censored: they distort your work. I do two kinds of music, one for dancing and another that is deeper. We want to promote the latter, to educate people a little more about what we do, but we don’t get any airtime. The radio



might play “La cachimba” but never an all brass concert.

There is no good vibe here about popular music. Radio programs that specialize in dance music will give a lot of airtime to foreigners, and it may be that their recordings are more technologically sophisticated than ours, or have better sound quality. Before, our “patio” recordings had very poor quality, and that sort of tarnished people’s perception of Cuban music. That’s why people preferred music from other countries.

When Oscar De Leon came on the scene, he did a good job of singing Cuban music, but it was badly played. Yet people still cheered him. There is a bit of misinformation out there, too, because people are afraid of the *boom*, which is what’s happening with popular dance music. Little by little, they have been destroying the *boom*. It almost

seems as though it is the CIA folks doing it, because it can’t be people from Cuba⁵. I say our stuff should come first, before anybody else’s; my wine may be bubbly, but it’s my wine, even if others don’t see it that way⁶. Then you have people complaining about the quality of our music, or they’ll bring up Rubén Blades, or this, or that, ... I have a song that’s just as good as “Pedro Navaja”; a song about *El Combinado del Este* (a well known penitentiary in Cuba). In it I warn young people not to get involved in crime, but since it talks about the Combinado prison, it was censored. On the other hand, Rubén Blades was able to get away with talking about “*la chica plástica*” and all that stuff on Cuban radio.

There is a lot of censorship going on and it is poorly targeted; it is very difficult to play what you want, touch upon current to-

pics; after all, popular music comes out of everyday life. I was not allowed to play my song “La Crónica Social” [The Social Story] on the radio, yet it’s a protest and a ferocious defense of our identity. It is written from a popular point of view but at a very deep level, and when I took it to the radio station they told me I was crazy, that they couldn’t play that.

There are music TV shows in Cuba that feature American artists just as they are, wearing jewelry and some really messed up gear, but when we go to be on television they make us wear a suit of some sort, and you can’t wear jewelry. You end up looking like an army guy or a State Security agent with a jacket and dark shades, or a Guayabera or khaki outfit and light brown shoes. We’re not feeling that, especially popular artists. With increasing technology, people start making comparisons between our stuff and the foreign made videos they’ve seen, and say: “Cuban musicians are not quite there, Cuban music is a little off.”

Since the time of Pello el Afrokán, we have all been making an effort to help Cuban popular music earn the place it deserves, and to make it young people’s preferred music. We accomplished this and were then labeled as vulgar. They started to shut us out and play foreign music. They canceled TV music programs such as “Contacto,” “Mi Salsa,” “Buscando al Sonero” and “Rompiendo la Rutina,” and who can survive such a storm? Finally, they just tried to put an end to *salsa*.

But there was a time during which *TURARTE* (Tourism and Arts Agency) was fighting with *MinTur* (Ministry of Tourism) because they didn’t want to pay to each other, and instead of putting together a very expensive show, they decided to have an orchestra. *Timba* orchestras began taking the place of the big shows in Havana; they took to the

streets to campaign for the *UJC* (Union of Communist Youth), like the *Nueva Trova* movement used to do. The impact was such that *timba* got top ratings, and then, after Cuba updated its economic system and legalized the dollar, Cuban musicians started making a lot of money. Those were years during which there was lots of tourism in Cuba.”

Does your last point have anything to do with censorship?

“I’m telling you this story because it is very much connected to everything that happened on the radio and TV, which seems to have been directed by someone in particular, very subliminally, to put a stop to popular music. Why? Because of the status the musicians acquired, because they bought nice cars, Mercedes Benz...”

So, was that official attitude related at all to the economic boom of the musicians who played salsa in Cuba?

It started at the same time as the *boom*. One of the consequences of poverty (besides suffering), is envy. There are people out there who, when they can’t have certain things would rather envy you than struggle to obtain them, particularly if they’re official bureaucrats. Remember that leaders here may have power but don’t make money. So they get to thinking: “How come this black dude is making so much money now?” And they start stabbing you in the back; it’s simple human nature. They have to drive a Lada and I’m cruising in a Mercedes.... They can’t buy one because they don’t have a way to get the money for it. Cubans have no way to come up with that kind of money, but it’s not my fault they’re not paid.

This situation made the problems plaguing popular music worse. Seeing things objectively, what went on amounts to major sabotage. Maybe some day the true story of the damage that was done to the most beautiful musical movement of this hemisphere will be known. The most highly developed popular music in this hemisphere was being created in Cuba, and it did not get the support it deserved. I'm telling you for real, we succeeded on the streets all on our own. It was just something that the bureaucrats were not able to control.

You know that the *Nueva Trova* movement served political interests. We serve those political interests, too, from the viewpoint of the masses. A lot of people don't realize or don't know that popular music is an expression of what is going on in real life."

Is there a difference between what's considered low class and what's considered popular?

Yeah, I can show you. "Dile a Catalina que se compre un guayo que/la yuca se le está pasando... [Tell Catalina to buy a grater 'cause her yuca's getting too soft]." That is one helluva an image and *double-entendre*. Nevertheless, a song like "Yo soy el Rey... Yo soy el uno" [I am the King, I am the one] shows that there is a difference between the popular and the vulgar. The boundary is knowing how to make popular music without going too far. The *babalaos* (Santería priests) say: "Quien come cangrejo camina pa'tras" [If you eat crab you end up doing the crabwalk]. This is absolutely true, and at the same time this refrain has had a helluva an impact for *NG La Banda*.

I'm always very careful when I'm performing live. I do certain things to connect with the audience; my show has a lot with to do with the moment, with those who are present. If there is a fat woman dancing a lot or a skinny one

who's really bad, I make up expressions based on that which might be somewhat off color, but then I don't use them when I'm going to make a recording. What you record gets out there and I'm very careful with that, not to cross the line. There is a boundary there that I think I've never crossed."

What is "the struggle" for José Luis Cortés?

"Picture this. We Cubans have been in this struggle for more than a century and if you don't have this idea down you won't get anywhere. In Cuba you have to struggle for everything; nothing comes easily; you have to wake up early to get the instruments; do the arrangements; get on the radio people to play your songs; go after everybody to program an activity for you; get the promoter to arrange a trip for you; worry about food for the musicians, and who knows what else...! Everything is a struggle!

NG La Banda even cost me a marriage, because I had to wake up everyday at seven or eight A.M. and go to bed at four or five in the morning, always hustling here and there for the group. Here everything is a struggle."

Are José Luis Cortés and El Tosco the same person? What part of you is rough and what side is courteous?

"*El Tosco* is great fun; you know, the one who is always fooling around, happy, drinking. He is the Cuban who has a drink, plays dominoes [and] laughs... José Luis Cortés is something else, the serious guy, the one who works hard and cares, the one who is persistent, detailed oriented. *El Tosco* is not like that. By contrast, he is impatient. *El Tosco* doesn't care about anything. They are two totally different people.

On the other hand, I don't think there is much of *El Tosco* in my life. The problem is that you don't want to lose your identity, and it is also a defense mechanism because people say: 'Shit, this guy is rough... be careful!' That's not true, I'm exactly the opposite."

Then, why El Tosco?

"Because of a pair of boots: During my years as a student at the performing arts school it suited me very well to be *El Tosco*, the tough guy who used to ride ox-drawn carts and all the girls used to hold on to me so they wouldn't fall off. I dug that! "You're gonna fall, baby... I can hold you!" But I never hooked anybody that way!"

I was designed for toughness. I remember this very beautiful blonde girl... I can't remember her name, but she is a great actress now. She sat beside me – She loved black dudes – and I thought she was interested in me. She told me: "Things can't be like this, you have to start reading, you are a beautiful black man..." She talked my ear off for a helluva long time; she was the first person who approached me that way. The next day I started reading *Les Misérables*... I used to sit outside the lunchroom, where the whole school used to gather in the late afternoon. I had found a pair of glasses with Coke bottle lenses on a bus, and in order to look like an intellectual, I would wear them to read.

I skimmed *Les Misérables* three times, but I didn't know what I had read. Yet it helped a lot, because after that I started to get organized in terms of what I wanted to do. Earlier on, I was an athlete. I spent my time playing baseball, soccer, basketball, doing swimming laps, lifting weights. I was more of an athlete than a musician. But I had taken the wrong path."

What is friendship? What do you think about betrayal?

"Friendship is one of the most important things in life. I have very few friends, even my Orula sign says that I am a son of betrayal. I have been betrayed by everyone⁸, but I still believe in friendship. I like to extend my hand to people and think that someday they'll realize what a good friend I am. Despite all they have done to me, they have not been able to destroy my hope of expressing friendship. 'Friend'—that word is very important to me. I wish I had friends!

Betrayal is a negative attribute. It is the most disgusting and dishonest thing a person can do. What I most regret in my life is the number of times I've been betrayed."

Editor's notes:

1- Juventud Rebelde is an official Cuban youth newspaper. El Caimán Barbudo, an official Cuban cultural magazine for youth.

2- Timba describes a certain feeling or vibe and is used as an umbrella term to define newer Cuban popular music from the nineties.

3- Bembé parties are gatherings at which certain Afro-Cuban drumbeats are played to summon an orisha, or Yoruba deity.

4- Charanga is a kind of Cuban music from earlier in the twentieth century that was played on European instruments and was heavily influenced by the son (a basic Cuban musical genre).

5- An ironic observation based on Cuban government rhetoric, in which the U.S. CIA is blamed for a variety of things on a regular basis.

6- An indirect, paraphrasing of a phrase from Cuban patriot José Martí's essay "Our América" in which he celebrates homegrown, American ideas and things over European ones.

7- The interviewer is making an play on words here, because the interviewee's professional name, El Tosco means 'the rough one' while his surname, Cortés, means 'courteous.'

8- Orula is a high-level deity of the Yoruba pantheon who is venerated by Santería worshippers.