

Leonardo Padura

“Chano Pozo’s Sad Night”¹

Translation by William Little (2015)©

“Chano Pozo was a revolutionary among jazz drums; his influence was direct, immediate, electric (...) His grandparents spoke through Chano Pozo’s drum, but so did all Cuba. We must remember his name so as not to lose it, as has happened with so many anonymous artists who for centuries have safeguarded the genuine Cubanness of musical art.”

Fernando Ortiz²

Now I am convinced that Caridad Martínez, the clear-skinned and svelte mulatta who lived with Chano Pozo³ for several years, never understood her man. We know this from the fact that Cacha revealed that, on that particular gloomy December 3rd 1948, the eve of Saint Barbara’s Day, Chano left the house “happier than ever,” and that he was thinking delightedly only about his upcoming début in the Strand. The musician’s joy, according to Cacha, was due to Chano’s certainty he had at last risen to the peak of his artistic career with those dollars stashed in his pockets, so many more than he ever imagined that existed in the world.

Nevertheless, while he was covering the distance between his apartment in Harlem and the Rio Café and Lounge on 112th Street, the greatest Cuban drummer of all times was, precisely on that day, a sad and melancholy man, buffeted by nostalgia. Unenthusiastically, he noticed the

¹ Leonardo Padura. “La noche triste de Chano Pozo” in *El viaje más largo; en busca de una cubanía extraviada*. Argentina: Futuro Anterior Ediciones, 2014, 179-194.

² Fernando Ortiz Fernández (1881 – 1969) is possibly twentieth-century Cuba’s most outstanding and renowned intellectual, who wrote major works in the fields of anthropology and ethnomusicology. He was the greatest scholar of Afro-Cuban culture. In fact, he is the first to have used the term “transculturation.” After leaving politics, he championed indigenous Cuban civic and cultural renewal. Among other scholarly societies, in 1926 he co-founded the Cuban Academy of the Language, which is affiliated with the parent Spanish national language academy. His most notable books, especially in the context of Padura’s article on Chano Pozo, are *La africanía de la música folklórica* (1950) and *Los instrumentos de la música afrocubana* (1952-1955).

³ Luciano (Chano) Pozo González (1915 – 1948) was Cuba’s most renowned jazz composer, dancer, drummer, and singer in the mid twentieth century. Incidentally, he is referred to in the Cuban animated film *Chico and Rita* (2010).



infinite lights of that oppressive city, some of which were lit up with his name: “MANTECA, CHANO POZO WITH DIZZY GILLESPIE’S⁴ BAND.” That’s why, with his feet in the cold of New York, Chano Pozo couldn’t keep his heart from flying toward Havana: at that very moment, in Cayo Hueso, Pueblo Nuevo, and Belén,⁵ altars draped in red cloaks are covered with votive offerings and candles awaiting the 4th of December, and drums are wailing their wild, ancestral prayer of welcome to Changó the Warrior,⁶ your father, the lord of lightening and the sword... But that night Chano will not play the drum... That is why, now, in New York under an intermittent snow fall, you are thinking about Changó and certain unkept promises that stir in your more than the cold.

With two hours to go before midnight, when Chano Pozo entered the Rio Café and Lounge, where he had decided to wait for some friends. He quickly greeted some acquaintances and then went over to the Victrola jukebox jukebox. After a lot of thought at last he had found a personal way to approach Saint Barbara’s Day... His mind occupied with nostalgia and promises, Chano Pozo completely overlooked imagining that, just before midnight, he would be carried out of that bar with six bullets in his body and wrapped in two red table cloths.

Back to the beginning

Cayo Hueso was fated for all time to be Cayo Hueso. The ancient and renowned fierceness of the capital’s old neighborhood, the echoes of its wretched and violent fame, have changed but little in the last two centuries. The flashy blacks of yesteryear now are reinvented by a type of hot newfangled bigshot; his most renowned and dismal homes famous since the Spanish period still survive, hidden behind a dirty façade that fails to express the image of what once lived and still does in its bowels. Nevertheless, if you go out well protected—and this only possible with someone from the neighborhood—you can traverse its most famous streets at any time of day, but preferably not at night, without worrying excessively that a furtive knife will puncture a lung or that you are ambushed on a street corner where you are relieved of everything including your shorts. Then you discover that not everything remains the same: in Cayo Hueso now there are tall clean buildings of crude luxury, and Trillo Park⁷ is a place where children run and play.

Asserting precedence over Pueblo Nuevo and Belén, for a long time this violent neighborhood claimed it was birthplace of Chano Pozo, that street percussionist who, in record time and using his Cuban drums, succeeded in revolutionizing innovations in bebop. I am walking all around Cayo Hueso searching for traces of Chano Pozo and his singular story. I am chatting on street corners, I’m contemplating places he frequented, I’m breathing the air he breathed, and more than once I get the feeling that the neighborhood reverts to what it was before, lugubrious and animated, and I get to hear the frenetic box rumba music⁸ that taking

⁴ John Birks (Dizzy) Gillespie (1917 – 1993) was a virtuoso jazz trumpeter, bandleader, composer, and singer. Gillespie and his band popularized bop music, including some Afro-Cuban rhythms.

⁵ Cayo Hueso, Pueblo Nuevo, and Belén are popular neighborhoods in old, central Havana. Cayo Hueso is also the Spanish name—listen to the overlapping pronunciation—for Key West, Florida.

⁶ Changó is an Orisha, a spirit manifestation of God, in the Cuban Yoruba religion of Santería. He is identified with Saint Barbara, whose color is red. December 4th is the Catholic feast day of Saint Barbara; in Cuba the day is celebrated as the Feast of Santa Bárbara/Changó.

⁷ Parque de Trillo is located five blocks east of the University of Havana in Central Havana. Covering one square block it is one of the oldest parks in Havana. It is a popular meeting place where rumba is frequently heard.

⁸ Box rumba (> *rumba de cajón* or *cajón de rumba*) rumba played by hand on percussion instruments made from wooden boxes (*cajón tumbadora*, *cajón bajo* and *cajita*) that were once used to pack fish. The musical keys are

place in the Rancho Grande residence. I hear the shouting of a row among buddies in Trillo Park, and with an outsider's suspiciousness I watch how two toughs are strutting by revealing their gold-plated teeth and shouting at the top of their lungs that they would screw their own mothers and they'd fight to the death with one and all.

"I don't know if Chano was born here or not," Herminio Sánchez tells me. He's a skinny mulatto with a tired voice who advertises himself as an authority on the secret history of Cayo Hueso. He's acting as my escort in some of my exploration of the neighborhood. What I know for sure is that it's where he suffered the most misery. This is where he was active, a homeboy, a member of the hood, along with his older brother, Pussy Man, and his homies Armando the Monkey and Francisco the African. All of them scrounging for a dollar, involved in a thousand scrapes, playing in any rumba group. Of course, Pussy Man was the one who stabbed a man to death in a row created by Chano, and the poor bastard rotted in jail... Afterwards, it was in this neighborhood that Chano put together his *comparsas*⁹ and where, in one of neighborhood's gambling joints, he did *abakuá*.¹⁰

"Ah, another thing I'm certain about is that Chano lived there in the África building on that corner. The África property, chum, is where any and everything went on. At night one light bulb lit the patio and full clotheslines and all sorts of hanging stuff made things even darker. It was a jungle and about 200 blacks were living behind it... Could you call it anything else? It was Africa! And besides it was so bad even the police didn't dare enter. They wouldn't dare. But the best thing about it is that the place had five exits. You entered on one side and you could get out in any direction.

The Africa building has gone the way of other divided up slum buildings in Havana. Time caught up with it, and in 1980 it had to be demolished. Nowadays it only houses an inoffensive *pelota* court.¹¹ Yet a lot of neighborhood folks dare to swear that that's where Chano Pozo was born.

"People shouldn't speak about what they don't know, son. But to know those things you have to talk to the family, right?" Petrona Pozo tells me. She's Chano's youngest sister, the one Chano liked best and the only surviving member of that family that was besieged by every misery.

"We moved to the Africa building when we were already bigger, after mom died. But we were born in El Vedado,¹² in the Pan with Timba¹³ residence on Calle 33, where Chano Pozo came from."

made with wooden spoons tapped on the side of the box opposite the sound hole. The large boxes are called *tumbadoras*; the smaller ones are called *quintos*.

⁹ A *comparsa* is a group of musicians, singers, and dancers who appear together for neighborhood and national festivals such as Mardi Gras (i.e., Carnival). The famous ones in Brazil are called *blocos de rua* or *carnaval blocos*.

¹⁰ *Abakuá* is an Afro-Cuban men's rather secret social society originating in Nigeria. It is a place for Afro-Cuban cultural rituals and ceremonies by means of drumming, dancing, and chanting in their semi-secret language. These ceremonies are known as *plantas*. *Abakuá* is most prevalent in communities surrounding Havana, especially in Regla, Guanacoboa, and the city of Matanzas.

¹¹ A *pelota* court is a walled-in ball court where games such as handball, jai alai, *pelota*, and racquetball are played.

¹² El Vedado is the modern (20th century) central business and residential district in Havana.

¹³ "Pan con timba" (literally, bread with "timba") means both hard times and a breakfast snack of bread and guava jelly. Online, Migdalis Pérez () gives an interesting popular etymology for the word *timba*, which she identifies as deriving from the English word "timber" from the dark color of the timber railroad ties installed by the English in Cuba in 1874. See her blog for the full explanation: Pérez, Migdalis. ¿Qué es el pan con timba? [What is bread with timba?] 7 June 2014. Web. 8 August 2015. <<http://www.quericavida.com/que-rico/que-es-el-pan-con-timba/>>.

A fortunate man

“After all, Chano was a very lucky man,” she asserts, agreeing for the only time with family members, friends, and acquaintances of the exceptional Cuban drummer. “You have to have a whole lot of luck to escape from where he escaped and to get to where he got.”

“And don’t forget how lucky he was,” Herminio Sánchez adds, “because the owner of the El País newspaper, Senator Hornedo,¹⁴ liked him. He was a magnate who lived in a mansion on Carlos III Street, the house that’s now the House of Culture. Because that’s the kind of guy Chano was, oh yeah!, a comedian and a pain in the ass. And Hornedo protected him and got him some little job and whatever. But his thing was music, and he was the only one here who played the drum and sang and danced; and everything he played was invented by him, because he never studied music, and I think he was actually illiterate. But he had what is called a “gift,” don’t you agree? And nothin’, what goes on in life, since Hornedo liked him, he could go in and out of his house whenever he pleased. It was Hornedo who gave him his start, I’m tellin’ you.”

“Yes, the truth is that Hornedo was very good to him,” Petrona Pozo also admits. “Thanks to the Senator, Chano didn’t have to sell newspapers or shine shoes, like my father, who was a bootblack until his death, there on the corner of Zanja and Belascoaín.¹⁵ But the person who truly helped Chano most was Amado Trinidad, the owner of Cadena Azul radio station.¹⁶ He was even the one who put up the money for Chano to be buried in Cuba.”

“I knew Chano very well,” Roberto Cortés Ibáñez, one of Chano’s co-religionaries who was also born and raised in Cayo Hueso, confesses with a trace of pride. “I met him when I was little, but later I stopped seeing him because, due to one of his fights, he was in jail in the youth reformatory in Guanajay¹⁷ until he turned 16. That’s where he learned to read and write...

¹⁴ Alfredo Hornedo Suárez was a powerful member of the Cuban oligarchy from the 1930’s until the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Here is what ... says in Web site entry about Jews in Cuba, including Senator Hornedo: “The very wealthy did discriminate against Jews, as they did against the poor, blacks, Chinese or anybody of mixed parentage, the latter constituted at the time somewhere around 40 % of the population of Cuba. What this meant was that Jews were limited to attending the poor man’s Club: Casino Deportivo de La Habana. Clubs were very important to the resident of Havana. It was not only a place of social life and activities, but also the only easy access to beaches, or swimming pools, a dire need in our long hot summer. The owner of the Casino Deportivo de La Habana, Alfredo Hornedo, an unsavoury Cuban politician, was originally the owner of a newspaper, El País, and later on a Theatre, which included an ice skating rink, named Blanquita, after his first wife, and later on renamed Karl Marx and a Hotel, Rosita, named after his second wife, much visited by the mob, later on renamed Sierra Maestra and now being refurbished. As his was not an exclusive club, and required of no large initial fee, some working class Cubans were members. I remember on Saturdays and Sundays the large Jewish membership, which kept very much apart, they did not want their girls and boys to fall in love with non Jews, and also because in many instances they carried their kosher lunch. The only members allowed to bring in food, the rest were expected to attend either the restaurant, cafeteria or bar managed by the Club. After the revolution these clubs were turned over to the different unions but for lack of adequate maintenance, some collapsed, some are closed and others are still open to the public at large. But they do seem to be en route to disappearing in the near future as they are located in an area in which a lot of real state development is going on.” [signed] La Habanera. The Jews of Cuba; Letter From Havana. n.d.. Web. 10 August 2015. <<http://www.jewishcuba.org/hebreos.html>>.

¹⁵ Zanja and Belascoaín (now Padre Varela Street) are two streets in the center of Havana.

¹⁶ Cadena Azul (Blue Chanel) was a Cuban radio station from 1939 to 1954. It was bought by Amado Trinidad Velazco in 1940. Velazco merged this station with others to form Radio Habana Cuba. In Cuba the call letters were RHC. In 1985, an AM radio station in Coral Gables, Florida, WRIZ, changed its call letters to WRHC in homage to the former Havana station. WRHC in the Miami area is also known as Cadena Azul (Blue Network).

¹⁷ Guanajay is a town of 28,000 inhabitants 38 miles SW of Havana.

Afterwards, we got together again when he moved into the El Ataúd building in the Colón¹⁸ neighborhood, very near my house. I lived there with Laura, one of the women I slept with.

“Chano was a short guy, but he was very strong, a “stud,” as one says. Also he was quite impulsive, and he was afraid of no one. But I think where he went wrong was getting into abakuá, because that religion has nothing to do with being rowdy; and, besides, we don’t have to go around advertising that we belong to that association. Moreover, when Chano died, he was already expelled from his group, not due to a lack of toughness manliness, no, not at all, his problem was that he recorded some secret chants with Cadena Azul Radio; so his cell expelled him for 120 years.

“On the other hand, I do know that the person who helped Chano Pozo most in this country was Rita Montaner.¹⁹ Don’t you go and believe that business about Hornedo. The senator was not as good nor did he like Chano as much as people say. The truth ... I don’t know if I should tell you this ... but, so what? it was a long time ago. The truth is that Chano was one of Hornedo’s toughs, who like all politicians, had his band of thugs. Get this, that was a tough time and there was no way to earn a few bucks, so Chano, after he got out of the reformatory, had no choice but to work for Hornedo, because if not, what was he going to do?

“And since I told you that, I’m going to say something that almost no one knows: when Rita Montaner helped Chano, and they even were featured together with the Dandys de Belén,²⁰ they were husband and wife, not married, of course, but husband and wife in reality,” Roberto Cortés Ibáñez insists.

A face in the crowd

Who, actually, was that tough ugly little negro, who, given his innate talent to beating a drum ascended one by one the steps that lead to immortality? Who was this man who obliged an important jazz critic to say this: “The powerful and principal influence in Afro-Cuban music on jazz and especially on bop, achieved its peak in winter 1947 when the director of Dizzy Gillespie’s band hired the Cuban drummer Chano Pozo for a concert at Town Hall?”²¹

Who was Luciano Pozo González, actually?

Chano Pozo was everything said by his chroniclers, family members, friends, but he was much more. Chano was Havana marginalism of his period and he was Havana itself, mistreated and happy, loud and pained, the only city capable of giving birth from its darkest loins a wild and natural talent like that man’s, who was destined for immortality thanks to his unique talent beating the skins on his drum.

¹⁸ “Ataúd” means ‘coffin.’ The Colón (Columbus) neighborhood surrounds the Cementerio de Cristóbal Colón, as it is officially known, is in Havana’s Vedado district. It is one of the most elaborate and renowned cemeteries in the world.

¹⁹ Rita Montaner (Rita Aurelia Fulcida Montaner y Facenda; 1900–1958) was a very internationally famous and multi-dimensional Cuban artist. She was successful as a singer, pianist, and actress. She was one of the top Cuban entertainers from from 1920 to her death. Perhaps her lasting fame is due most to her performance of Afro-Cuban songs.

²⁰ Los Dandys de Belén was one of Havana’s most famous Afro-Cuban comparsas (musical groups) in the 1940’s to the 1960’s. Belén is a neighborhood in Havana surrounding the Jesuit prep school, the Colegio de Belén, in Old Havana (la Habana Vieja). After 1961 the prep school was confiscated and turned into the Technical Military Institute.

²¹ New York City’s Town Hall is a major historical music and radio performance venue on West 43th Street in Midtown Manhattan. It has a seating capacity of 1,500 people.

“That’s why anyone can tell you something about Chano, because Chano was all over the place,” Roberto Cortés Ibáñez assures me. “He could live just as well in one neighborhood or another; he went with this woman or another one; and he associated with all sorts of comparsas. He was from any neighborhood... So you can get the picture, for I still remember this: he was a dancer and drummer in comparsas in El Barracón, La Mejicana, La Colombiana Moderna, La Sultana, and La Jardinera, all of which are comparsas from different neighborhoods. He acted as the “baron” when he was with the Dandys of Belén; then, by the 40’s, when he was famous, he left, because to front for the Dandys you had to have money and fine clothes.”

“Chano began to rise when he joined Cadena Azul Radio, Amado Trinidad’s station,” his sister Petrona recalls. “Right away he began to earn good money, and the first thing he did was buy a “petronio” suit, with that very expensive cloth.²² Later, he invested a lot of money in suits and clothing. That’s why he became one of the best dressed men in Havana. More than one story used him as an exclusive model for their clothes, so you get an idea about how that black man dressed... I’ll never forget that giant ring he bought for himself: it had a stone this big, the size of a garbanzo bean; that is, a boiled garbanzo. And on a chain he wore a solid gold medallion of Saint Barbara the size of the top of a liter milk carton; it weighed a ton. And the entire crown of the Virgin was made of rubies...”

“Back to what I was telling you: on that radio station is where he put together the Blue Ensemble,²³ and he began to become really famous. Also, that’s where he met and made friends with Rita Montaner.”

“Although I was very young, I remember Chano in Rita’s house,” Cala recalls. Cala was a professional photographer and a true bongo player, who was known among Cuban jazz musicians as ‘the white man with a black man’s hands.’ I was a friend of the family, and since I liked music so much I crashed parties they held every weekend. Chano was always there, so elegant. But you had to see how that man played: he even got music out of the floor, because he would throw himself on the ground, and with his huge hands he would begin to make the crockery jangle. Far out! ... As far as I know, it was Rita who placed him at Radio Cadena Azul, and Chano was always grateful to her for it. Even though he was quite brutish, he was always grateful and sentimental.”

“At that time, and in the early 40s, Chano Pozo was a famous person in Cuba, because he had the Blue Ensemble and he was the station’s exclusive musician,” says the musicologist Jesús Blanco.²⁴ “I remember that Chano always went here and there with Manana, who was, as everyone would tell Agustín Gutiérrez, the bongo player with the Havana Septet²⁵ and also with the National Septet. Chano and Manana were a terrible pair, and it’s said that they did things that only crazy guys could do. One day they were in El Ataúd preparing to go do the rumba, but before leaving Chano covered his bed with five-dollar and ten-dollar bills because he already had a lot of money and, later, when he was sweating profusely, he threw himself down backwards on the bed and he said to Manana: “Nigger, whatever sticks to my backside is for spendin’ today.’ Manana peeled about a hundred dollars from his back, and, to spend all of it in one day—oh, my

²² A “petronio” suit was a brand of expensive and stylish clothing that advertised itself as appropriate for elegant people.

²³ The Spanish for this ensemble is Conjunto Azul, of which there have been a number so named throughout Latin America.

²⁴ For an online reference to Jesús Blanco Aguilar, see the following Web site: .” Pablo Delvalle Arroyo. Síntesis sobre el son. June 2007. Web. 12 August 2015. <http://www.herencialatina.com/Arsenio_Padre/Son_Delvalle.htm>.

²⁵ The Havana Septet (el Septeto Habanero) was founded in 1927 when a seventh instrument was added to the original band, the Havana Sexteto (el Sexteto Habanero), which was founded in 1920. And it still exists in 2015!

god!—what things they had to do in this Havana of ours. But then the best thing occurred. They say that Chano opened the showcase where there were twenty suits of the best cloth, and he began to talk to the suits. He was wont to do that; he'd bite the knuckle on his ring finger when he was thinking while he was talking through clenched teeth to the suits. He'd say to them: 'Let's see, I'm not going to take you out today because lately you've become pretty boring. So, you, what's going on? Nah, don't go sad on me; you're the one I'm going to wear today'—and he'd choose the other one. That's why there are people who say he wasn't right in his head...

"But everything people say, that Hornedo this, that Amado Trinidad that, tell people not so: the person who helped Chano Pozo most in this life was Miguelito Valdés.²⁶ Look here, Miguelito was the guy who recorded Chano's songs in the United States, like 'Blem, blem, blem,' that was a hit, and he always respected his money, he never got tangled up with him, like what did happen here in the Copyright Association, where they reduced his dough, and when he went to demand it they even shot him in the butt, because the truth is that Chano wasn't as tough as they say... But, besides, Miguelito Valdés was the one who invented the dance academy that Chano and Manana created in El Ataúd, where Miguelito himself sent American dancers who wanted to learn to dance the rumba, although what they really wanted was something else: in two words, to smoke, drink, and screw. And it was also Miguelito Valdés who got Chano his first contracts in the United States, and he sent him there to triumph and to become, finally, the greatest conga player ever from this country... And it was Miguelito Valdés who paid to repatriate Chano's body in 1948..."

"Yes, of course, by the 40s Chano was an important figure en Havana," Litico Rodríguez,²⁷ who was a swing dancer back then and now is an actor with an unstoppable comic vein, tells me. "Amado Trinidad was his "godfather"—as he said—and Rita Montaner was his wife, although they never signed a certificate. He was a personality on RHC Cadena Azul and at his exclusive tailor Oscar de San Rafael's shop. He cruised around in a Cadillac, he wore Chanel No. 5, and he played just as often in the Tropicana as in the National Casino. In addition, he and Bola de Nieve²⁸ were the only blacks here who could shop at El Encanto,²⁹ which was the most expensive and most chic department store in all Havana... But what's most unbelievable is that that same man, with all the money he was already earning never stopped living in apartment houses. He had several women and he put each one in a room in an apartment house, and even

²⁶ Miguelito Valdés (Miguel Ángel Eugenio Lázaro Zacarías Izquierdo Valdés Hernández, 1912 – 1978) was born in the Belén neighborhood in Havana and then moved to Cayo Hueso. He was a close friend of Chano Pozo. As a singer Valdés' it was said that he was "as black a white guy as you would meet in Havana." Among his long list of major Cuban and international credits are work with the Sexteto Habanero, the Septeto Jóvenes del Cayo, the Orquesta Habana, RCA-Victor, Xavier Cugat's Orquesta Siboney, and Hollywood films with Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth. He excelled in Cuban Afro-Cuban, son and guaracha music, including many of his own lasting compositions. Valdés is also known as Miguelito Valdés-Babalú because of his classic rendition of the Afro-Cuban song "Babalú." (It is really worth listening to his version of this song on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdgBokynDEc>.)

²⁷ IMDb lists seven films in their list of filmography for Litico Rodríguez.

²⁸ Bola de Nieve (English: Snowball; Ignacio Jacinto Villa Fernández; 1911 – 1971) was a black popular cabaret-style Cuban singer, song writer and pianist who worked with Rita Montaner, and he was associated with luminaries such as Andrés Segovia and Pablo Neruda. Since he was a strong supporter of the Cuban Revolution he was not persecuted as were many other Cuban homosexuals such as Reinaldo Arenas and dozens more.

²⁹ El Encanto was to Havana what Bloomingdale's is to New York City: the largest department store, five stories high. It opened on the corner of Galiano and San Rafael streets in Old Havana in 1888. It was nationalized by Fidel Castro's régime in 1959. A bomb destroyed it in 1961. According to Cuban authorities the building was bombed by CIA operatives as part of the campaign to destabilize the Castro régime.

with Cacha, who wanted to be a rumba dancer, he pimped her in the Colón neighborhood. What's more, often he came with Rita to our neighborhood and they got into rumba groups or they sat on a corner with their chums drinking rum and beer in any cellar bar. I think that Rita, 'the Only One,' it was with Chano that she discovered what a real "masher" he was. I'm just saying...

"And of course it was Miguelito Valdés who helped him most. They'd known each other since childhood, and Miguelito was already singing in the United States with Xavier Cugat's orchestra when he came to Cuba on vacation and proposed that Chano go off with him, but they didn't let Chano travel because he had a criminal record (nah, little stuff: robberies, knifings, fights, those things), but Miguelito got him his papers and put together a tour with Cacha and Pepe Bequé as dancers. And that's how Chano went away to become famous in jazz, because here he was already the king of rumba."

The road to glory and death

By 1946, when Chano Pozo leaves Cuba ready to test his fortune in indispensable New York, his personality and his work had already filled a transcendent chapter in Cuban music. By Chano Pozo's hand, rumba had achieved that extraordinary shift from a residence to disco and it had completely invaded the universe of son starting from his work leading the Conjunto Azul, that he had put together thanks to Amado Trinidad. Also, he had combined his work with Arsenio Rodríguez's, the greatest Cuban son musician of those years. The Blind Wonder, the man who had transformed the essence and rhythm of son by 'inventing' the format of the son ensemble (by virtue, among other changes, of the introduction of what today is the indispensable Cuban conga), and who had begun to popularize several of Chano's compositions, among whose classic pieces are 'Tumba palo cocuyé,' 'Apurúñeme, mujeres,' 'Tintorera ya llegó,' and the son songs 'Serendé,' 'Rumba en swing,' '¿Por qué tú sufres,' and 'Cómetelo to,' which he would soon record in New York.

Success after success, that ugly black man, now converted into an elegant fellow, had made a name for himself in radio and in Havana cabarets, in Carnival comparsas and in people's dances thanks to, more than a more or less important patron, above all his outsized natural musical talent as an exceptional drummer able to express a form of life—that is, a way to understand the world—with his hands.

"That's when envy began," Mario Bauzá³⁰ tells me in his definite tone, which brooks no debate. "I took advantage of a quick stop in New York to make an appointment with the father of Afro-Cuban jazz and we finally met in the La Catedral bar on Amsterdam Avenue and at the 106 bar on the very edge of the Barrio and Harlem. We spoke about his work, and jazz, and the non-existence of salsa ('no one has written a salsa piece and, in music, what isn't written doesn't exist,' he told me), and also about Chano Pozo. Everyone was talking about him and, remember, never in his life, at the top of the National Casino in Havana, had anyone's image ever been featured in bright lights; that is, until Chano Pozo got there. I recall that it could be seen all along

³⁰ Mario Bauzá (1911 – 1993) was a major Afro-Cuban jazz musician who brought Latin music to the New York musical world. When he was a boy prodigy he already played the clarinet with the Havana Philharmonic Orchestra. By 1933 he was playing with Cab Calloway, Dizzie Gillespie and Ella Fitzgerald, and he introduced Chano Pozo. In fact, Chano Pozo and Mario Bauzá co-composed the famous pieces "Manteca" and "Tin Tin Deo." The fusion of Bauzá's typically Cuban musical style with Dizzy Gillespie's bebop created what is considered the first appearance of Latin jazz. Interestingly, Mario Bauzá introduced Tito Puente to the New York jazz scene.

Third Avenue... And those things aren't good in Cuba, for sure, people don't receive them well...

"I remember the day Chano left for the United States as if it were today," Petrona says, and then she contemplates the altar next to her in the place of privilege that's flanked by the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre³¹ and St. Lazarus with a giant statue of St. Barbara who's grasping a shining sword. "It got late for me and I had to hurry back to the port because he was leaving by ship carrying his red convertible he'd bought with money sent to him by Miguelito Valdés. He planned to be there for a short time, which is why he even sent with Cacha, his wife at that time. But I knew Chano was not going to return. I knew it. A few days before Chano had done a "review,"³² and the result was that he had to turn himself into a saint and to take up Changó before crossing the sea. But my brother was very disobedient, and he said he would do it when he returned. Changó is unforgiving... Even though the truth is that it seemed that he'd been forgiven, because my brother got there and immediately triumphed in jazz. Up there where they invented jazz."

Dizzy Gillespie, the outstanding trumpeter, who, together with Charlie Parker and Chano Pozo, pushed the revolution in bebop to its highest level of development, said: "When Chano arrived in the United States, I already had my own orchestra. But the problem is that I hadn't found a good drummer. Then I went to see Mario Bauzá, who was my musical godfather and was even the guy who got me a place in Cab Calloway's band when Cab's band was the best in New York. Then I asked Mario, who was an authority on Afro-Cuban music if he knew some truly good drummer. 'I have a guy for you, but he doesn't speak English,' he told me.' That's how I chose Chano Pozo and I've never regretted it since. When I saw him play seven drums simultaneously I knew I'd found a musical genius. And, for sure, he didn't need to speak English. We succeeded in understanding each other perfectly through the musical language of our ancestors."

"Yes, that's how the story went," Mario Bauzá confirms for me. "In '47, I was again working in the "La Conga" cabaret, where I was already the musical and artistic director in addition to directing and playing in the orchestra of Machito and the Afro-Cubans. So, one day they tell me a group has arrived from Cuba, some musicians and a dance pair and that they wanted to find me to see if they could work there. Then I went to see them in the dressing room, I introduced myself and there I met Chano Pozo and Cacha, the one who was his wife. That same night Miguelito Valdés—he was like Chano's father—came to the cabaret (note that when he spoke Chano even looked down like a child does), and Miguelito said to him, 'look here, Chano, it's as if this man were me, so listen to everything he tells you...'"

³¹ La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is the Catholic patron saint of Cuba whose basilica sanctuary is in the town of El Cobre near Santiago de Cuba at the eastern end of the island. This version of Saint Mary is also known in Cuba as the Virgen Mambisa and La Chachita. The origin story of the miracle of this 16-inch statue is interesting and is of particular veneration by most Cubans, whether they are observant Catholic or not. In brief, according to local Cuban legend, three boys, two Indian brothers, Rodrigo and Juan de Hoyos, and Juan Moreno, a young African slave—they are known as the "three Juanes" although only two of them were named Juan—found the completely dry statue floating in the Bay of Nipe. After a number of seemingly miraculous vicissitudes a chapel and later a basilica were built to house the statue in the small town of Cobre.

³² Review > *registro*. In Yoruba Santería a *registro* is achieved through a process of divination by which a person determines or realizes the correct path to take in terms of daily activities, work, health, finances, love, etc. The divination process also reveals which Yoruba Orisha is indicated for the person undergoing the *registro*. Santería practitioners believe in and strongly recommend doing a *registro* before beginning any new task.

“That was our first meeting and then, when I saw him play, I realized that man was a musical phenomenon. That’s how he could introduce about eight ‘heet’ numbers: ‘Nagüe, Nagüe,’ ‘Pim, Pim, Cayó Berlín,’ ‘Boco-Boco,’ ‘Ariñáñara Bocuere,’ and in 47 they opened a Latin club in the famous Palladium, which was named after one of his songs: the ‘Blem-Blem.’ Everything he played was a raving success, and what’s most surprising is that Chano knew nothing about music, but the thing is, he was born with a gift. He played, sang, and danced, but he was a genius. That’s so. Forget about looking for explanations.

“Then one day Dizzy came to see me, for he’d left Cab Calloway’s orchestra and he already had his own band, and he says to me, Mario, they’ve given me a great chance to do a concert in Carnegie Hall, and I’ve come to you for advice about what I should do. And he says to me: don’t hesitate, put Afro-Cuban jazz on stage. And he’s surprised and he says to me that without me he doesn’t know anything about Cuban rhythm. And I say to him, well, don’t worry, I’ve got a guy here who’s a caged lion... We get in the car and take off for here, for 111 Seventh Avenue, where Chano was living. As soon as we arrive, with explaining anything, I say to him: ‘Hey, grab your drums and play something for this friend of mine.’ And Chano played ‘Manteca,’ and Dizzy was stunned with his eyes wide open. Right there began another of the great moments of Mario Bauzá’s Afro-Cuban jazz, because the rendition of ‘Manteca’ that Chano and Dizzy made and that recital in Carnegie Hall went down in the history of bebop and of all jazz.”

“And so you can see how the thing happened,” Litico Rodríguez recalls now, “before the debut they announced: ‘Dizzy Gillespie with Chano Pozo,’ and the next day they publicized ‘Chano Pozo with Dizzy Gillespie.’ The guy stole the show...”

When Dizzy Gillespie joined the band, the path to consecration and fame began for Chano Pozo. Alongside the great American trumpeter he begins a tour of a number of the country’s cities, and, among other hits, he records some of the classical pieces of bop and Latin jazz: “Manteca,” “Cuban bip,” and “Cuban bop.” It’s the apotheosis of Cuban drums that for all time enriches the rhythmic concept of popular American music.

Chano had turned into a celebrity, *Ciro Bianchi Ross* has written in a lucid article. “‘Manteca’ had given him a good amount of money that he collected a few hours before his assassination. After a vacation he would fulfill a contract at Billy Berg, the famous cabaret-restaurant in Hollywood, which at the same time would serve him as the anteroom for his debut at the Strand. Publicity trailers were already showing on the Strand’s theater screens ...”

“With Chano Pozo we had had an immediate success,” *A* moved Dizzy Gillespie recalls. “But what’s most important is that Chano changed musical taste in the United States, and I’m happy I had something to do with that phenomenon. Chano and his seven Cuban drums was the decisive factor in the process of introducing and integrating Afro-Cuban music into American jazz. Chano Pozo was an innovator and a new point of departure.”

“How could it be otherwise, my friend? With his drums that man could do whatever he pleased.. Look here, when Christopher Columbus arrived in Cuba, Chano Pozo had already been for some time the best drummer ever to come out of this country, and I know that another has not yet been born like him,” *Cala* pontificates indisputably.

“But Chano didn’t feel comfortable in the United States, of course not,” affirms *Idelfonso Inclán*, el Chino, masseur to famous boxers, among whom are numbered world champions *Kid Chocolate*, *Kid Gavilán*, and *Sugar Ray Robinson*.³³ He wanted to return because he knew that

³³ *Kid Chocolate* (*Eligio Sardiñas Montalvo*; 1910 – 1988) was a Cuban boxer whose record was 152-10. He won the world boxing championship in 1931. *Kid Gavilán* (*Eligio Sardiñas Montalvo*; 1926 – 2003) was a Cuban who

he owed it to Changó, and he was scared shitless of him. Besides, his comfort zone was in Havana, in the big homes and in the neighborhoods where he did all his crazy things. To make matters worse, when he took the tour through the southern United States and he discovered there how they treated him like a common negro and not as he deserved or how he thought he deserved, he was very disillusioned. Since he and I knew each other since 1930 and we came out of the Dandys together, he went several times to the Stigman gym where I worked for Sugar Robinson and where I would give him massages and I always saw how tense he was. And, of course, I was present the day Chano and El Cabito³⁴ met.

Sad, solitary and final end

Chano Pozo studied the play list on the Victrola jukebox. He inserted a coin in the slot and chose 3-D. He carefully observed how the mechanical arm hovered over the row of records and he chose one exactly, with a precision that in him seemed like a magical art. He waited for the record to start spinning on the turntable. Then, through the player's speakers there began to parade past, helter-skelter the wild and aggressive notes of a melody born in the heart of Africa five centuries earlier. "Manteca" inundated the Rio Café and Lounge and Chano Pozo, its author, closed his eyes: now you're in Havana and you're playing the welcome to the burning red cloak of your irascible African father, Changó, the major Orisha, owner of fire, lightening, thunder, and war, but also of dance, music, beauty, and virile power, the one who unleashes storms ... You don't feel your feet tremble and beginning to beat the floor, again and again and again, starting an ancestral dance carried over by your ancestors from the forests of the country of the Yorubas.

The doors of the Rio Café and Lounge opened and, a man there, a whiff of frozen air entered the café. The hands of the newcomer, hidden in the pockets of his overcoat. Eusebio Muñoz, alias El Cabito, a Puerto Rican vet marked by the psychosis of the war in which he served as a sniper trained to kill, observed his distracted victim, whose feet were moving in New York, but whose mind was in an old Havana neighborhood and facing an altar to Changó.

"It was on account of women," opines Cala.

"Disobedience, Changó had warned him," Petrona Pozo tells me.

"Drugs, for sure," affirms Roberto Cortés Ibáñez.

"It was envy," Mario Bauzá answers categorically.

"Money, a hassle between men," is what Herminio Sánchez affirms, repeating the version that Caridad Martínez—Cacha—gave to the reporters.

But Cacha didn't know her man. Nevertheless, her version—confirmed by other Cuban musicians who were centered in New York at that time—was the most promulgated: El Cabito owed Chano fifteen dollars, and Chano demanded them from him in public in a rather aggressive manner.... Even so, at his death the Cuban drummer had fifteen thousand dollars at home. But El Cabito had been offended in the face of other men...

won his first world welterweight championship in 1951. Sugar Ray Robinson (Walker Smith Jr.; 1921 – 1989) was a black American boxer whose lifetime record was 173 – 19. He held world championships from 1943 to 1955. Furthermore, he is the first boxer to hold world championships in five different weight divisions.

³⁴ Here is what the Wikipedia article on Chano Pozo says about El Cabito: "Pozo's killer was a local bookie [at the El Rio bar in Harlem] named Eusebio "Cabito" Munoz [sic]. Pozo had accused Cabito of selling him poor quality marijuana and Cabito retaliated." August 2012. Web. 19 August 2015. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chano_Pozo >.

“On the night of December 3rd, Chano, Miguelito Valdés, and I had a date for a debut in a bar, and in the afternoon I had been cashing some of my travelers checks. Since there was still a little time left, I stayed home listening to a Cuban baseball game on a small radio of mine, when they call me on the phone and tell me, “Hey, Mario, they’ve just killed Chano. On Lennox, between 111th and 112th. At the bar in the Río Café.”

“Then I began to verify it and found out that his death was set up by another person, by envy itself that reawakened here, for having triumphed and had women and money. But that person who fabricated his death is paying for it in life, and the murderer, whom they called El Cabito, was nothing more than an instrument to do the deed; for they even put the gun in his hand, but he also paid for it. I remember that he saw me one day, a little time later (the guy got off free because they said he was insane), and he told me he was leaving New York because he couldn’t stand the shame over what he’d done. So he went to Miami where he got into an argument and the other guy said to him: You’re not going to do to me what you did to Chano, and right there he stabbed him.”

When Mario Bauzá ends his story, I dare ask him if forty-five years after that sad night of December 3rd, 1948, he still couldn’t say the name of “that person who fabricated his death.”

“I can’t,” he told me.

“Buddy, the truth is that no one chose to say that it was a bad drug deal,” Chino Inclán recalls, for he interrupts the massage session at this point in the story: El Cabito had sold Chano weed that was no good, and Chano had slapped him hard in public after which he refused to apologize even though El Cabito said that he would forget everything if he apologized. Then El Cabito swore he would kill him like a dog. The strangest thing is that Chano knew it, and with his street experience he dismissed the whole thing. It was as if he didn’t care if he died, right?”

“But it wasn’t marihuana,” in turn I’m assured by Litico Rodríguez, who, at that time, was living with a trio of swing dancers in New York. The hassle was much bigger, it was over cocaine. Chano bought a capsule worth fifteen dollars, and two things are imaginable: either Chano didn’t know how to use it and it made him ill, or El Cabito really planned to swindle him, even though, when Chano socked him in the El Prado café on Lennox, he said that they’d also tricked him. It was then that he asked Chano to apologize or he was going to kill him. The strange thing is that afterwards El Cabito caught him just like that, so tranquil.”

Meanwhile, in front of the jukebox Chano was setting in motion through his veins the long sacred warrior history of his African blood. Your hands dispersed the shadows in the El Africa mansion, your feet polished the dirty cement of El Ataúd, your deep voice broke down the sickly walls of the walls on Pan with Timba residence, and you were again living as you had always done, as only you knew how to live ...

When Chano Pozo turned around, the newcomer pulled out his gun and fired once. The idol of Cuban music fell to the floor shot through the heart. El Cabito approached the body, which was still moving with the spasmodic rhythm of death, and, slowly, he fired five more times...

“Pepe Bequé, who came in at that moment,” Litico relates, “tried to get between them, but El Cabito turned on his heels and Pepe had to run away fast and throw himself to the floor so that he wouldn’t get hit by the shots El Cabito fired at him. When he stood up, Pepe ran out shouting, “It was El Cabito, it was El Cabito,” and still on a run he entered the Small Paradise, where I was working... But they never found the guy guilty, and, whatever, the worst had already been done... Chano Pozo died, as the song says.”

In a New York bar, next to a jukebox that mechanically continued running through all grooves of that record, lay Chano Pozo, shrouded in his blood and his music, but, actually, he had died in Havana, even though the city that made him in its image and likeness was forced to wait eight interminable days to, with its own soil, to cover the body of the greatest and sadest of all Cuban drummers.

Epilogue

“After he died,” Maestro Mario Bauzá recalls, “I go see Gillespie and he says to me, ‘Listen, I don’t want any more conga players,’ and I say insistently that there are other good ones and that without a drummer there’s nothing Afro-Cuban, and I send to him Marcelino Valdés, who was available nearby. But, no way, he isn’t satisfied, and, another day he says to me, ‘Listen, Mario, all these people are just nursing babies alongside Chano. In everything I played, he did something that changed my rhythm, and that’s something that none of these types can do. Without Chano this is no longer the same.’ And he was right: it was never the same again.”

Even so, his records remain, memorable and revelatory of his greatness. His legend endures: ancestral, slum tutored, violent, and sad. And his memory remains, posted on every street corner in Habana where still today some black man with big hands knows how to wail on the conga like the gods on the skin of a good drum. Rumba remains.

“Rumba, I feel your grief, Rumba player, let’s lament this grief.
In the district of Pueblo Nuevo, where he was born and grew up,
Havana made him famous, it hallowed his name.
This rumba creator of son music always surpassed its rhythm,
let it erase nature, an inspirer’s vocabulary.

Chano Pozo, I sing this rumba to your memory,
in homage to your labors.
May God receive you in his bosom
and offer you his goodness.
And may the Holy Spirit
follow you into your rest.

Chano Pozo, Chano Pozo, Cuba and the rumba cry for you.
Chorus: Chano Pozo, be at rest, Cuba and the rumba cry for you.
For the whole world is crying, how this man died.
Chorus: Chano Pozo, be at rest, Cuba and the rumba cry for you.
For the whole world is crying, how this brother of mine died...”

“Chano Pozo died.” [Murió Chano Pozo]³⁵
Voice: Miguelito Valdés.

Chano Pozo, rumba remains...

³⁵ You can find a recording of this song, “Murió Chano Pozo,” on [YouTube](#).

1985 and 1992