

Chapter 4: Stylistic Analysis

As shown in previous chapters, stylistic choices reflect larger changes brought on by tourism and address issues of tradition and identity. Many musicians who would not have dreamed of performing traditional son ten years ago have changed their tunes, literally and figuratively, in the radically altered socioeconomic environment of the Special Period. Others struggle to assert their longtime connection to son in an increasingly competitive environment. These attitudes are directly implicated in musical sound.

In this chapter, I will analyze performances by musicians I recorded during the summer of 2004. My analysis focuses on formal structure, arrangement techniques, and elements relating to each septeto's "groove." My understanding of "feel," "groove," and "swing" follows that of Washburne, who states:

Feel encompasses what notes are chosen, how they are played, and where they are placed by the musician. The groove refers to the overall effect of their interaction. Swing is achieved when a balanced tension and resolution between the feels of the musicians create momentum within the music. In this way you can have a groove that does or does not swing (Washburne 1998: 161).

Special attention is paid to tres guajeos, bass patterns, and rhythms played by the bongó and other percussion, as these elements often serve as

identifiers of other styles.¹

I make a distinction between classic and contemporary son styles. I define the classic style as that of the recordings made in the late 1920s and early '30s by groups such as Septeto Nacional, Septeto Habanero, and Sexteto Boloña. Orozco (1992), Díaz Ayala (2003), Acosta (n.d.), and others have identified these recordings as typifying the Golden Age of Cuban son, when the format of the septeto was crystallized.

As Manuel (1985) and Scruggs (2003) have noted, contemporary styles of son often bear little resemblance to these early recordings. Despite performing in the classic septeto format, contemporary performers are inevitably influenced by a wide range of playing styles. Some players, however, make reference to the classic son style through identifiers such as specific tres licks, bass patterns, or vocal style. I argue that these identifiers take on iconic significance, immediately identifying the performer as a more authentic sonero.²

¹ One element that will not be discussed here is that of lyric content. In my experience, the lyrics of original songs are more or less in line with conventional son repertoire, consisting mostly of upbeat exhortations to party, love songs, or other variations on these themes. Although sexual innuendos are common, they are never as explicit as those of timba, and I have not heard any songs that seem to imply any deeper social commentary. Perna (2001: 111) suggests that the topical lyrics of timba have contributed to its popularity, and it may be that son groups are less popular because their lyrics tend to be less relevant, but I reserve this aspect for further study.

² The earliest recordings are often characterized as "urban son" or "modern urban son"

Although, as noted in Chapter 3, relating particular styles to specific moments in history is problematic in many ways, my approach here reflects the rhetoric of traditional vs. modern employed by musicians themselves. It is my view that, while certain stylistic traits are thought of as “older” or “newer” by musicians who play them, the fact that they are used within the context of a single ensemble serves to break down dominant conceptions of genre “evolution.” In other words, identifying elements that are commonly described diachronically reveals their actual synchronic nature.

This again underlines the ways in which musical sound relates to larger social dynamics. The association of a discrete musical element with a particular moment in history can reveal attitudes about tradition and authenticity that in turn reflect contemporary culture.

(Moore 1997: 88). For my purposes here, neither term seems adequate, due to the complex ways in which these playing styles have come to represent a national, and no longer specifically urban style, and, with regard to the latter term, the fact that “modern” has also been used by some scholars to describe later styles. García (2003: 307) notes that commercially successful mambo recordings in the 1950s were characterized as “modern” for their use of extended harmonies and arrangement techniques associated with jazz, and Manuel (1985: 254) uses “modern son” as the rough equivalent of “salsa” (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of the problematic aspects of “salsa” as a descriptive term for Cuban dance music). Thus, the terms “classic” vs. “contemporary” seem to be the least problematic choices for my purposes.

The Golden Age: Classic Havana Son

It is difficult to trace regional identity through performance practice in the early years of son, since during the first two decades of radio broadcast and phonograph recording in Cuba, all recording and radio performance took place in Havana. This fact is less relevant to the dominant history of son, since most accounts describe the son as having traveled gradually from Oriente to Havana, evolving as it went, and emerging fully formed in time for the first recordings in 1916 (Blanco 1992: 21). However, more recent studies suggest that different son variants may have existed much earlier and in different parts of the country (Acosta n.d.; Orozco 1992).

Nonetheless, the groups that recorded in Havana, especially Septeto Nacional and Septeto Habanero, were those that first gained commercial success.³ It was their playing style that became known as Cuba's "national music" (Díaz-Ayala 2003; Moore 1997: 88), and provides the basis for the dominant evolutionary theory of son performance styles as noted in Chapter 3. In musical terms, this discourse tends to suggest an evolution in terms of rhythmic complexity as well as instrumentation; since the Havana sound did not often include syncopated tres guajeos or an anticipated bass, scholars typically view the subsequent use of these elements in later recordings as innovations, despite the fact that these elements may have been present in

³ See Moore (1997: 92-113) for an account of the commercial rise of son. Factors such as the development of cheaper recording technology and Cuba's relatively earlier entrance into radio broadcasting were crucial factors in the popularization of the Havana septets.

other son styles throughout the country. García (2003: 168) notes that syncopated patterns used by bandleader Arsenio Rodríguez in the 1940s may have been rooted in tres guajeos performed in rural son variants since the beginning of the century. It seems probable that son was typically highly syncopated until it got “smoothed out” for recordings in Havana (Ben Lapidus, p.c. 2005.)

Still, the performance styles of the early Havana septetos are regarded by musicians and audiences alike as the quintessential son sound (Acosta n.d.:16). Thus, a brief examination of this classic sound will aid our understanding of contemporary performances of traditional son.

The Classic Septeto Sound

The first groups to be recorded playing son in Havana were sextets, consisting of tres, guitar, bongó, maracas, claves, and some type of bass instrument, often a double bass, but also sometimes a *marimbula* or *botija*.

Sexteto Habanero was the first to incorporate a trumpet in 1927, and its competitor, Sexteto Nacional, followed suit almost immediately, making the septeto the most popular format (Blanco 1992: 41).

The bongó style of the early septetos (and sextetos) was almost single-handedly defined by José “El Chino” Incharte, who recorded with Sexteto Boloña, Sexteto Habanero, and Sexteto/Septeto Nacional at various points throughout the 1920s and ‘30s (Strachwitz and Ávalos 1995: 5). His playing closely resembles the typical changüí bongó style. He appears to be continually improvising, playing few time-keeping patterns. He also

frequently incorporates the low growling sound called the *bramido*, also used in changüí (Lapidus 2002: 124).⁴ Musical example 1 shows Incharte's playing just before the montuno of "Aquella Boca," recorded by Sexteto Habanero in 1927. Incharte frequently employs rhythmic patterns that push against the central pulse, especially ternary phrasing of binary subdivisions (mm. 75-76 and 82-84), one of the central characteristics of improvisation in Latin dance music (Manuel 1998: 138).⁵

⁴ The *bramido* is produced by rubbing the fingers across the head of the drum (this effect can be heard at the beginning of CD Track #1, notated in musical example 1). Changüí bongoceros, as well as those on the early recordings in the 1920s, favor a much lower tuning of the bongó, and frequently use wax to tune the heads. Both factors make the *bramido* much easier to produce than on standard contemporary bongoes, which tend to be tuned much higher (the skin is pulled much tighter). Some scholars have suggested that the *bramido* actually stems from Afro-Cuban sacred music, specifically *ekué* drumming styles (liner notes, Sexteto Boloña 1995). Although the bongó playing of this period is extremely fluid and improvisational, Orlando Fiól has suggested to me that there are important formal elements, such as key moments when the bongocero is expected to play certain types of phrases.

⁵ Musical examples transcribed from recordings include measure numbers relative to the entire piece, rather than just the excerpt. Each transcription can be heard on the compact disc accompanying this volume (CD track information can be found in the table of contents as well as in the subheading of each musical example). In the case of sound clips excerpted from longer pieces, two time-readings are noted. The first, found in the subheading of the example, refers to the occurrence of the clip within the original recording. The second time-reading is found under the last staff of each system, and refers to the time relative to the sound clip on the accompanying compact disc.

The addition of trumpets to son ensembles significantly changed the role of the tres. In the sexteto format, the tresero played the dual role of accompanying the singers and playing the various *llamadas* (calls) that signaled each section. The introduction to each piece was typically a part of the main melody or the melody of the *estribillo* (coro) usually ending in an arpeggio of the tonic chord (see musical example 2). With the trumpet able to play the melody, the tres introduction was reduced to the simple arpeggio. After Septeto Nacional and Septeto Habanero began recording with a trumpet player, nearly all of the introductions followed the same formula: the tres played the tonic arpeggio twice, the band entered on the clave, and the trumpet played part or all of the melody. Musical examples 3a.-c. show variations on the typical introductory arpeggio.

The tres accompaniment pattern was generally quite similar to the introduction, consisting of 1-bar phrases that emphasize the downbeat and the “and-of-two” of each measure. This pattern lines up strongly with the 3-side of the clave, but makes no significant change for the 2-side (as in example 3a).

In bongó and tumbadoras notation, noteheads on lower lines indicate attacks on a second, lower drumhead. Normal noteheads indicate open tones, “x” noteheads represent slaps, and slash noteheads represent notes that are not played as strongly. The bongó bell, when played at the same time as the bongó, is notated above the staff; higher “x” noteheads represent attacks on the closed end of the bell and normal noteheads represent the more resonant open end.

Although the anticipated bass found in most son-derived dance music began to emerge in recordings during the 1930s (Manuel 1985: 254), Cuban bass players assert that the “real” son bass pattern is much less syncopated (Del Puerto 1994: 6). Bebo Valdés confirms this:

The original son in its beginning, as played by Septeto Habanero, Septeto Nacional, and Septeto Boloña [sic] and Sonora Matancera, never had syncopation, and it consisted of...bass lines that accented strong beats (Valdés in García 2003: 142).

Indeed, bass players on the classic recordings either employ the *tresillo* or *bolero* bass patterns (García 2003: 142; see example 4). Although there are several theories as to the origin of the anticipated bass (Manuel 1985; Betancur Álvarez 1999), it is unclear how or when it became the standard performance style. Although it was used almost exclusively by Arsenio Rodríguez’ band in the 1940s, many of Rodríguez’ contemporaries continued to use the straighter bolero pattern well into the 1950s (García 2003: 239-41). At the same time, many rural son variants, such as *nengón*, *kiribá*, and *changüí*, may have been using variations on the anticipated bass before the turn of the century (Lapidus, p.c. 2005).

Vocal performance styles of this period reflect the need for vocalists to sing without amplification over the rest of the band. Leads often had piercing, almost nasally vocal quality, as exemplified by Abelardo Barroso, while

tenors, such as Bienvenido León have a robust, full quality.⁶ Although melodies are often syncopated, the singers tend to favor legato phrasing, glissandi, and other vocal techniques that by contemporary standards might sound rhythmically imprecise. The verse sections, in particular, often featured two- or three-part harmony on sustained notes, giving way to the somewhat more rhythmic estribillo (see example 5).

Although trumpets had been used in other popular music ensembles in the past, the addition of the trumpet to the son groups was probably prompted by widespread interest in jazz (Robbins 1990b: 186). Like early jazz trumpet playing, the classic septeto style is very closely linked to singing. Trumpet players typically played the introductions just as they would be sung by the ensemble, with little variation. The trumpet also typically played two or three call-and-response improvisations at the beginning of the montuno, with phrasing that echoed typical soneos. Despite being emblematic of jazz, Cuban trumpet players did not incorporate a jazz vocabulary (e.g. blues scales) (Manuel 1998: 133).⁷

⁶ It is unclear to what extent the voices heard on these early recordings were altered by the recording process. The vocal timbres heard could be a result of such alteration, an indication of the particular voices present in each group, an indication of the styles preferred at the time, or all of these. Barroso, whose singular nasal style marks many early recordings through the beginning of the 1920s, later recorded with Orquesta Sensación in the 1950s with a completely different vocal sound!

⁷ Rick Davies (2001) discusses in detail the performance style of Félix Chappottín, the

The recordings of this period typically feature a long verse (or *largo*) with two subsections (AB), each with different harmonic progressions. These are often repeated two or three times, making the verse considerably longer than the montuno. Occasionally, the montuno consists of only one repetition of the estribillo with one iteration by the lead singer, and some recordings even leave out the montuno completely.⁸

The Son Montuno of Arsenio Rodríguez

In the late 1930s, groups performing son began to expand the septeto format by adding a second trumpet, tumbadora, and piano. Although various groups had been experimenting with these instruments in various configurations since the late 1920s, the first group to standardize what came to be called the “conjunto” format was that of bandleader Arsenio Rodríguez, who formed his first conjunto in 1942 (Blanco 1992: 34, García 2003: 132).

García’s (2003: 133-63) analysis shows that, beyond merely adding instruments to the ensemble, significant changes were standardized in Rodríguez’ band in both formal structure (i.e. the arrangement) and interaction between core instruments (especially the bass, bongó, and newly

longtime trumpet player for Septeto Habanero and later Arsenio Rodríguez, who almost single-handedly defined Cuban trumpet playing in the early half of the 20th century.

⁸ See discography, especially recordings by Sexteto Boloña (1995). Díaz Ayala (1994: 12) points out that production factors may have shaped early recordings considerably. The producer may not have allowed bands to extend the montuno, for example, due to the limited space on 78rpm records.

added tumbadora).

Rodríguez expanded the classic son form (largo – montuno) to include six distinguishable subsections: a prominent introduction, a short verse, the montuno, a solo (either by tres or piano), followed by a 1- to 8-bar break performed by the whole ensemble called a *cierre*, and a final climactic section called the *diablo* (lit. devil), which incorporated interweaving trumpet parts with the sung estribillo (ibid: 136-41).

Rodríguez instructed bass players to “make the bass ‘sing’” (ibid.: 142), and created bass lines that broke from the typical tresillo or bolero patterns. They emphasized off-beats, and included notes outside of the corresponding triad. The bass, as well as the tres and piano, tended to rhythmically complement the vocal melody, especially in the montuno.

In order to make the bongó work well with the tumbadora, Rodríguez greatly reduced the improvisation of the bongó, insisting instead that it perform more steady time-keeping patterns. In this way, the bongó and the tumbadora were able to interlock tightly and create a more dense, driving groove (ibid.: 154-55).

Rodríguez also standardized the use of the *cencerro* (cowbell) by the bongocero. Although the use of a bell in the montuno section can be heard on some early recordings by Septeto Habanero, it was Rodríguez who codified its use as part of the main role of the bongocero. Whenever the band moves to the montuno, the bongocero stops playing the bongó and plays the bell instead (Sublette 2004: 480).

Example 6 shows the typical time-keeping pattern of the bongó (called the *martillo*, or “hammer”) and the pattern of the bell used during the montuno. Unlike the playing of “El Chino” Incharte, as shown in example 1, these bongó patterns strongly emphasize the quarter-note pulse.

Rodríguez’ main competitors, all-white conjuntos like La Sonora Matancera and Conjunto Casino, gained popularity performing guarachas at fast tempos. Although they had adopted Rodríguez’ conjunto format, their arrangements tended to be much simpler, especially in terms of rhythmic elements. García (2003: 235-237) and Sublette (2004: 483) both note that La Sonora Matancera played straight downbeats in the bass, and lacked the level of sophistication in the rhythm section that Rodríguez’ band had.

Although the term conjunto is often used, like septeto, to loosely describe a band’s stylistic approach as well as its instrumentation, the difference in styles between conjuntos soneros, like Rodríguez’ band, and conjuntos guaracheros, like Conjunto Casino, makes it difficult to discuss performance in terms of a unified conjunto style. For my analysis here, I follow García’s lead in referring to arrangement techniques and performance practice that emulate Rodríguez’ conjunto as son montuno style.

Contemporary Son

Contemporary son performance styles bear greater resemblance to son montuno than to classic son. Bass players almost always play what is commonly termed an anticipated bass pattern (see example 4), and tres players almost always play some variation on the standard 2-bar piano

pattern, shown in example 7 (Manuel 1985: 249, 1998: 134; García 2003: 151).⁹

Bongoceros always switch to the bell in the montuno section, and tend to tune the bongó much higher than those of the classic players. They also rely much more on the martillo pattern (see example 6).

Formal structure also tends to follow that of the son montuno. Performances often have a composed introduction and invariably include a verse, montuno, and tres solo, although the diablo (also frequently called a mambo, or, in the case of shorter, improvised back-up lines, a *moña*) is often left out. Instead, the group might return to the original estribillo, sing a shorter version, or change to a completely different estribillo (always over the same harmonic cycle).

Perhaps the most immediately noticeable difference between classic and contemporary styles, however, is the tempo. Early recordings rarely feature bands playing faster than 160 bpm, while contemporary bands favor tempos in the 200 bpm range.

Influences of Guaguancó

The influences of sacred and secular Afro-Cuban percussion styles on popular dance music have been well documented. Manuel has noted the influence of rumba on the anticipated bass (1985: 252-53) and on soneos (1998: 129-30). Betancur Álvarez (1999) suggests that the claves (musical instrument)

⁹ Unlike classic tres accompaniment patterns, the standard 2-bar pattern reflects the two halves of the clave, emphasizing the down-beat of the 2-side and off-beats on the 3-side.

as well as the son clave (timeline) are borrowed from rumba. Also, countless performers of popular music throughout the 20th century have been active in other Afro-Cuban musical contexts, sacred and secular (Évora 1997: 187; Moore 1997: 94-95).

These traditions each have their own vast repertoire and specific performance techniques, which are beyond the scope of this work. However, certain elements found in performances of guaguancó (one of the best known and most commonly performed rumba variants) can serve as identifiers that are immediately recognized by performers and audience members when performed in other contexts.

An immediately recognizable identifier is the clave pattern. Guaguancó uses a clave that differs only slightly from son clave (example 8). In guaguancó performance this clave accompanies a specific composite rhythm in the *segundo* and *tumbadora* drums. Example 9 shows the interlocking patterns of the two supporting drums in guaguancó (the *segundo* and the *tumbadora*) and the melody resulting from the open tones of the two parts.

The style known as son guaguancó, as used by Arsenio Rodríguez to describe some of his own compositions, deserves some mention as well. Rather than incorporating rhythmic elements from rumba, Rodríguez' guaguancos employ lyrics and formal structures derived from guaguancó. Most notably, Rodríguez arranged the *diana* (a long introductory phrase, usually sung in vocables) for trumpets. Example 10a shows a typical

guaguancó diana, followed by one of Rodríguez' stylized version arranged from trumpets in example 10b.

Timba Influences

Perna (2001: 110-56) details performance practices associated with timba, currently the most popular dance music in Cuba. In many ways, timba bands expand the formulas of son in much the same way that Arsenio Rodríguez expanded upon classic son. Bands place much greater emphasis on the montuno section, alternating rhythmic changes, breaks, and virtuosic instrumental passages with a nearly endless supply of estribillos.

A typical timba band incorporates up to 15 musicians, always including drumset, electric bass, horns, and, often, two keyboards. Although essentially using the same harmonic cycles found in other dance music genres, timba arrangements often use modal harmonies and chromaticisms such as those found in post-1960s jazz, funk, and soul (*ibid*; also Moore 2005: 18).

While many of timba's salient features rely on the dense textures created by this expanded, electric ensemble, stylistic differences between timba and other styles are found in core instruments such as the piano and bass. The rhythmic texture is more often felt in relation to guaguancó clave than to son clave, prompting some scholars to characterize timba as a mixture of U.S. jazz, funk, and rumba (Hernández-Reguant 2004; Orovio 2004: 210).

Piano montuno patterns are typically more rhythmically tense and percussive than the standard 2-bar pattern (see above), often varying over 4

or 8 bars (Perna 2001: 127). Pianists strive to develop their own, unique style of playing a montuno (Moore 2005: 18). The montuno from “La Bola,” in example 11, is a typical example. It uses tenths rather than octaves, employs contrary motion, and never emphasizes the first beat of any measure.¹⁰

The role of the bass is greatly expanded in timba. In addition to playing highly syncopated accompaniment patterns, bassists often play melodic figures in unison with the horn section or the vocalists. Bass players occasionally incorporate slap-style playing similar to that heard on recordings by U.S. groups such as Parliament Funkadelic or Tower of Power (Perna 2001: 123-25). Track 10 of the compact disc, from “La Expresiva” by NG La Banda, is a great example of funk and R&B influenced bass playing. Toward the end of the clip, the bass plays a unison line with the vocalist, transcribed in example 12.

Most timba arrangements have a significant textural change, or “breakdown” section, usually at the entrance of the montuno or in other key moments of heightened intensity. Variously referred to as a *bomba*, *apoyo*, *presión*, or *masacote*, this section usually involves some combination of instruments dropping out of the mix while others continue to play, sometimes increasing the tempo or rhythmic intensity of their parts. A typical *bomba* has percussion dropping out while the piano continues and the bass

¹⁰ Actually, this example was quite difficult to transcribe, and may contain some minor errors. This in itself is further evidence of the greater complexity of timba piano styles relative to standard 2-bar patterns!

begins to thump the side of the bass and emphasize beat four with downward slides on the bass strings (Perna 2001: 130; Moore 2005: 18; see example 13).

Given the controversy surrounding timba and the rhetoric of timba and son as two opposing poles, the use of timba styles by performers of son might have significance beyond simple stylistic affinity. Although my questions along these lines were never answered clearly by musicians, incorporation of timba-style breaks represent, at the very least, a way of “updating” the septeto sound, making the best out of an otherwise limiting musical situation. The need to improvise and make the best of things is a recurring theme in the everyday lives of most Cubans living at this particular moment in history.

Analyses of Contemporary Son Groups: Havana

The following analyses cover several groups recorded during my fieldwork in Havana in June and early July of 2004. All groups gave permission to be recorded, and in most cases I was able to discuss the performances with the performers afterward. The musical examples show how musicians fluidly incorporate both traditional and contemporary elements.

Félix Godón y Su Trío

Recorded June 18th, 2004, Havana.

Felix Godón is a tresero of Congo ancestry from Las Tunas, in Oriente.

He plays every other day in a bar on Calle Obispo in Old Havana. I sat down with him during his lunch break, and he told me a bit about himself.

Godón told me he cannot remember when he started playing music. He only knows that when he joined the military, at sixteen, he was already playing the tres and some percussion. His stint in the army brought him to Havana, and he joined the military band for a while, after which he was promoted to become the director of Melodías de los 40, a post which he held for 14 years. Like many larger orquestas, Melodías was dissolved after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Godón now finds himself in the position of having to retire (and take a 30% pay cut in his already meager salary) or make ends meet by playing in bars and hustling gigs for his bands.

Godón is an amazing tresero. His heaving picking style and frequent use of the double-strum or *doblado* technique identify him immediately to my ears as a tresero of the old school, from Oriente. This is what had initially drawn me to him, with the multitude of treseros posted up and down the streets of old city. In this tourist district, conservatory trained guitarists turned treseros are a dime a dozen, and I was curious to see what a more seasoned player would have to say.¹¹

However, Godón was not much interested in talking with me about

¹¹ Lapidus (2002: 88) identifies *doblado* (tremolo) style picking (where the tresero essentially attacks each note twice, producing a sort of echo effect) as a style only employed by older players in *changüí*. I have observed that it is employed even by soneros from Oriente who don't play *changüí* actively; it is rarely heard in Havana.

playing the tres or about classic son. He was eager to tell me about the many other projects that he worked in on the side. He listed the instruments that he could play: accordion, piano, trombone, trumpet, guitar, and bass. He urged me to come see his larger group rehearse, to hear some more sophisticated music.

When he plays on Calle Obispo, he is accompanied by a bass player and bongocero, both of whom are in their late twenties. Although I was unable to speak at length with either of the younger performers, the bass player mentioned that the two younger musicians had graduated from ENA (Escuela Nacional de Arte), one of the two major music schools in Havana.

On the recording analyzed here, “El Traguito” (a famous guaracha by Juan Almeida¹²), the trio was joined by a friend who sang the lead vocal line and played maracas; normally, Godón sings the lead line, and the other two players sing the coros.

The tune begins with a variation on a classic style tres intro, similar to the one heard in “Vitico” (see example 3c, above). This introduction gives the piece a flavor that leans toward classic son, despite the fast tempo.

The performance of the verse continues in more or less standard

¹² Juan Almeida fought alongside Fidel Castro in the 1959 Revolution, and has since occupied a number of important posts in the Cuban government and armed forces. He represents one of the only high ranking government officials to express any interest in music, as well as one of the only highly visible Afro-Cubans in office. He is generally highly regarded as a true hero of the Cuban revolution, especially among musicians (*Cubanacan* 2005, Moore p.c. 2005).

contemporary style. The bass player plays an anticipated pattern, the bongó sticks pretty close to the martillo pattern, and Godón's tres playing falls fairly regularly into 2-bar phrases against the clave. Godón's use of the doblando picking technique can be heard throughout the verse (listen for a slight echo-effect in his more pronounced lines), but it is much more audible in the tres solo (example 14). Judging from Godón's attitude toward his younger, Habanero colleagues, I view this emphasis on older picking techniques to be a conscious affirmation of his superiority as a sonero. It is immediately clear to listeners that he is an Oriental, a real sonero, and not just some university graduate who can play some guajeos. This solo is also another example of ternary phrasing of binary subdivisions. Brackets show how Godón phrases cross barlines, creating rhythmic and harmonic tension by not resolving strongly to the tonic until measure 168 (marked "c").

The end of the tres solo marks a shift in the groove (or rhythmic texture; see above). Godón sets up a rhythmic vamp while the bongocero works the crowd for tips. When he returns and the coro enters again, the bass player stops playing his anticipated pattern and begins a much more syncopated, funky bass line that fits in between the alternations of the coro. The bongocero also changes his pattern on the bell and bongó, playing the guaguancó clave (see example 15). Given the funkiness of the bass line, I view this texture change as more of a reference to timba than to guaguancó, since timba bands tend to use the guaguancó clave.

This last example shows a style of bongó playing not found in classic

septeto or conjunto recordings, since Godón's bongocero plays a bongó on a stand instead of between his knees, as the bongó is traditionally played. Many bongoceros in Havana have started to use a bongó stand to enable them to play the bell while continuing to fill on the bongó heads with their other hand. Other percussion items are sometimes affixed to the stand as well, effectively transforming the bongó into a miniature drumset.

José Graciela, bongocero for Cuarteto Rumí

Recorded June 19th, 2004, Havana.

I first heard Cuarteto Rumí in 2003, while traveling with a group of American musicians. They were among the first groups that I heard incorporating timba-style bombas, although since then I have learned that it has been a popular addition for the last few years among younger musicians. Graciela told me that he played drumset for years in a timba band, and would prefer to be playing drumset today, but the work for big bands had almost completely dried up. Cuarteto Rumí's gig playing in front of the Hotel Inglaterra has been his main source of income for the past few years.

Like Godón's bongocero, Graciela plays his bongó on a stand. He has also added a number of auxiliary percussion instruments to the stand as well, making his the most elaborately-modified bongó I have seen. He has developed a highly personal feel (or *marcha*) which incorporates the bongó

martillo pattern, the clave (played on a plastic woodblock), cha-cha bell,¹³ and a lower drum affixed to the side of the bongó itself (his playing can be heard on CD track #13). Example 15 shows the transition to a bomba-style break in Cuarteto Rumi's version of "Harina de Maíz." The first two measures of the example show Graciela's normal marcha, which he alters as the band enters the bomba, leaving more space and making the groove a bit funkier.

Ilián Torres

Recorded June 24th, 2004, Havana.

Ilián Torres, a tresero who plays at the bar called Lluvias de Oro, just down the street from Félix Godón, told me that he listens more to piano players than to tres players. He graduated a few years ago from ENA in classical guitar, but, like many of his classmates, he switched to playing tres because that was where the work was.

The band at Lluvias de Oro plays the standard batch of tourist songs, like "Son de la Loma," "Lágrimas Negras" and "Hasta Siempre," along with a handful of jazz standards popularized by Frank Sinatra, like "My Way," and "As Time Goes By." Torres' playing tends to be quite busy, and incorporates a fair amount of chromaticism and blues-inflected lines. Torres appreciates jazz for its instrumental virtuosity, but his real love is timba. Like many piano

¹³ The cha-cha bell is smaller than a normal cencerro. As the name suggests, it gained popularity in charangas during the rise of the cha-cha-cha. It is typically played by the timbalero, who mounts it to the side of the timbal.

players, he works on defining his unique style of guajeo, stretching the normal 2-bar phrase to 4 or 8 bars. He played me one of his favorite creations, which shows an obvious timba influence (see example 17).

In this example, points where the guajeo lines up with a stroke of the clave are marked with an “X.” As Washburne (1998: 163) notes, the clave is also emphasized by attacks on the “and-of-four” of the 2-side (which is heard as an anticipation of the syncopated 3-side), and by playing straight quarter note or eighth-note patterns on the downbeat of the 2-side. The former instances are marked “a” in the example, and the latter marked “b.” This guajeo is even more rhythmically tense than the example from “La Bola” (example 11), since in the downbeat of the 2-side is only emphasized at the end of each eight bar section, and the beginning of the second 4-bar phrase (mm. 5-7) does not emphasize the clave at all.¹⁴

Torres’ case underlines the ways in which the larger socioeconomic context of the Special Period is implicated in musical sound. Although essentially forced into joining a son group by the dire economic situation, his obvious interest in more modern dance music is immediately evident in his playing style. To local listeners, he is instantly recognizable as a member of the younger generation and a fan of timba.

¹⁴ Although Ilián showed me this guajeo a number of times, I was not able to even be sure of where the pulse was until listening back to it for hours on headphones!

Ignacio Richard and Septeto Machín

June 23rd, 2004, Havana.

In my first week in Havana, I spoke with Ignacio Richard, director of the newly formed Septeto Antonio Machín. Richard invited me to his home to see some rehearsals of the group several times, but on each occasion, the rehearsal was cancelled or postponed due to power outages or schedule conflicts with the key group members. Fortunately, I was able to record the group at a performance at UNEAC that same week.

Richard told me that he was the director of Septeto Nacional for thirteen years, but had decided to break off from that group in order to perform more interesting repertoire, with a bit more of a modern sound. Along with some other members of Nacional, Richard formed Septeto Antonio Machín.

The modern sound Richard was talking about, however, amounts to little more than the incorporation of an electric bass and some more extended tres solos. Otherwise, the band stays pretty clearly within the son montuno style. Richard, like his contemporary Juan de Marcos González, is a revivalist at heart. Like many musicians of his generation, he was inspired to return to Cuban son by the historic performance of Oscar D'León in 1983.¹⁵

Like Juan de Marcos González' band, Sierra Maestra, Septeto Machín stays close to the aesthetic of son montuno. Their introduction to "Se Quema

¹⁵ See chapter 2.

"Pueblo Nuevo" features somewhat simple breaks based on the son clave (example 18).

Something that is quite often found in contemporary septetos is the substitution of vocals for horn parts. In the introduction to the son guaguancó "Ven, Ven, Ven," Septeto Machín performs a stylized version of the guaguancó diana (which in Arsenio Rodríguez' band was normally arranged for three trumpets) in three-part vocal harmony (example 19).

Both of these examples show that Septeto Machín's arrangement concept takes its cues from son montuno rather than classic son. In addition to stylistic similarities, the band's repertoire has all of the formal structure found in Arsenio Rodríguez' compositions, especially in terms of the subsections of the montuno. The following table shows the formal structure of "Ven, ven, ven."

0:00	0:53	1:23	2:33	3:54
Intro	Verse	Montuno	Solo (bongó)	2 nd Coro ("diablo")

Although the section I have labeled "diablo" does not involve a specific pre-composed trumpet line, as in the case of Arsenio Rodríguez' diablos, I argue that this section functions as a diablo, because it incorporates interwoven lines between the vocals and trumpet, and constitutes the climactic moment of the tune.

Rubén Nidetz, the tres player for group, is also a traditionalist. Nidetz won the Encuentro de Treseros competition at the Festival Nacional

de Septetos, which indicates that his playing had the swing that Barbarito Torres, one of the judges, and himself a tresero, was looking for. Compared to the other players in the competition, Nidetz' playing is virtuosic but devoid of jazz tropes like the use of major-7th tonic sounds, "ii-V" progressions, and blues scales. Nidetz won the competition over players like César Brito, whose playing belies his greater interest in jazz.

César Brito and Son Soneros

Recorded July 2nd, 2004, Havana.

César Brito, tresero and director of septeto Son Soneros, started as a trombone player in charanga bands. Originally from Matanzas, he made a career of playing in the hotels of nearby Varadero beach, until an operation on his stomach made it difficult for him to use his diaphragm, seriously affecting his trombone playing. While in the hospital, he wrote arrangements, and started to learn the guitar. Later he switched to tres so that he could lead a septet, and he formed Son Soneros with some other musicians on the hotel circuit in Varadero.

César is heavily influenced by jazz, especially guitarist George Benson. His style on the tres definitely reflects this; in his solo performance during the Encuentro de Treseros, he even did a little Benson-style scat, matching the notes of the tres with his voice. Brito told me he felt his approach was not looked upon favorably by the judges at this competition. He was sure that his use of jazz phrasing and harmonic sensibility (e.g. diminished scales, extended chromaticism) would not sound traditional enough.

It is true that when Brito played with the back-up band for the competition, which played a very basic son accompaniment for each soloist, his playing sounded quite idiosyncratic. But when I had the opportunity to hear his group Son Soneros at a rehearsal downtown I could see where his approach was going.

Son Soneros was perhaps the most eclectic sounding group I heard all summer. My first impression was that these were energetic young musicians eager to make their mark as a highly original, different-sounding septeto.

Brito, in his late thirties, is by far the oldest of the group, who are all in their twenties. Trumpeter Joaquín is the youngest, having just graduated from the university. Brito writes all the arrangements and, in rehearsal, he is definitely in control. He bounds around the stage, cuing dynamics, breaks, and coros, then bounding back to center stage for a George Benson-style tres lick. The arrangements are extremely tight, and make use of jazz harmonies, Tower of Power-style breaks, as well as a range of Cuban dance styles. The mambo section in “Me Quedé Con Juana” shows the use of a tonic major-7th sound, and Brito’s proclivity for blues scales in the trumpet line (example 20). Note also the use of a ii-V progression to reach the bVI chord in this example. Although “ii-V” progressions are occasionally found in contemporary son, this approach to a non-tonic or relative major chord sounds particularly jazz-influenced. The phrase itself is also a bit surprising, since the phrase is finished by the vocals and ends on the bVI rather than the tonic minor.

The use of blues scales is also heard in the background trumpet parts on “Saca La Mano, Antonio” (example 21). Here the trumpet background parts, which in other bands might be left to the trumpet player to improvise, are through-composed like in salsa and jazz big-band arrangements.

Like Septeto Machín, Son Soneros also uses vocals in place of horns, as in the bridge of the same song (example 22). I also note the use of dynamics in the vocal part at measure 63, as well as the chord, which incorporates the 3rd, major-7th, and major-6th of the IV-chord, an interesting harmonic change.

This section also shows Brito’s penchant for complex arrangements: the first iteration of the coro line by Julia, the lead singer, is accompanied by a highly syncopated unison line in the bass and tres, followed by the entrance of the coro, the sforzando at measure 63, which is then followed by yet another syncopated unison line begun instrumentally and answered by the chorus. The actual montuno does not start until the end of this example, so the whole 28-bar segment functions as an introduction to the first estribillo.¹⁶

“Saca La Mano, Antonio” also includes a number of changes in rhythmic texture, including a section that quotes the melody and typical rhythm of “Mozambique No. 1,” by Pedro “Pello el Afrokán” Izquierdo. Mozambique is a variation of comparsa style rhythms played at carnival

¹⁶ I note the sforzando here as a creative use of dynamics, since the dynamic range in contemporary son typically follows the form of the tune. Bands tend to increase in volume during the montuno, pulling back a bit for the solo, and then cranking up to full blast for the end of the montuno.

time, invented by Izquierdo in the 1960s (Moore 2005: 9).¹⁷ Example 23a shows a sketch of rhythms performed in a typical mozambique percussion ensemble, followed by a transcription of Son Soneros' Mozambique quote ("Mozambique #1" can be heard on CD track 19). The rhythms played by Rosa, Son Soneros' bongocera, loosely mimic the overall sound of mozambique. Like José Graciela from Cuarteto Rumí, Rosa plays with a bongó stand, allowing her to play bell and skins at the same time.

Although Brito writes all of the arrangements, he is not the only one interested in jazz and R&B. Lead singer Julia gets a chance to show off her R&B vocal style in "Ahora Te Pido, Sonero." Example 24 shows one of her scat-style soneos.

When I saw them rehearse in Old Havana, the band was pumped up for their Havana debut. All but the trumpet player regularly play together in hotels near Varadero, so they are seasoned players, but I could tell that coming to the capital was an important event for them. Floored by the creativity and vitality of their arrangements, I asked whether or not they got a chance to play these tunes for tourists in Varadero.

Yeah, yeah, from time to time. A lot of times, the tourists want something more well known, "Son de la Loma," or something like that, and, sure, we play that too. We have an arrangement of "Son de la

¹⁷ See Moore (2005, Chapter 6) for a discussion on Izquierdo and the widespread influence of mozambique in the 1960s.

Loma" that's on fire, really! But we play our thing from time to time (Brito, interview).

I asked the bandmembers if they thought it was easier to get gigs since they were a septet (and thus a "traditional music" group), and they all nodded agreement. They were upbeat about these circumstances. Because they enjoyed playing in a septet, they were glad to be able to get gigs, even though not all of them were avid dance music listeners.

Joaquín, the trumpet player, later confessed to me that at the beginning he was not so sure about joining a son band. His friends, who, like him, mostly listen to rap groups, gave him a hard time. But the success of the band, especially its invitation to a national festival, had shut them up. He told me that now he was pretty excited about son, and felt like he could continue to play in bands like this professionally if the opportunity arose.

None of the members of the group are full-time professional musicians. Each works another job, and rehearse nightly in Matanzas at Brito's mother's house. Although the group is officially a professional group, represented by Empresa Ignacio Piñeiro, they have not worked enough to be entitled to a full-time pay schedule.

I met several other musicians in Havana who shared Son Sonero's enthusiasm for jazz. Ángel Luís "Sinsonte" Balmaseda, the lead singer for a Septeto called Jelengue, told me,

Oh yeah! Stevie Wonder, Lionel Ritchie, Earth Wind & Fire, Tower of Power, George Benson! Everything, that's what I like. I'm only a

sonero at the moment that I start singing! (Balmaseda, interview).

Ramón Castro, a left-handed tresero from Trinidad, had a flashy, over-the-top style that reminded me of César Brito, but he did not play much in the way of a tumbao. Instead, he frequently left the tumbao to “comp” like a jazz guitar player would.

He proudly proclaimed himself a completely self-taught musician, having learned the tres, the piano, and the accordion solely with the help of Chick Corea method books. Of all the treseros I spoke with on my trip, he was the most vocal about his disdain for what he called “tourist songs,”¹⁸ saying that if he could, he would much rather play *filin* or ballads with “American harmonies.”

Santiago de Cuba

Son Diamante

Recorded July 30th, 2004, Santiago de Cuba.

In Santiago I heard markedly fewer traces of jazz and American harmonies, but the impact of timba was evident in many groups. The following excerpt comes from a 15-minute jam on “Lágrimas Negras,” and features a bomba-style break similar to the one played by Cuarteto Rumí back in Havana (example 25).

¹⁸ “Canciones de turista.”

I had the opportunity to attend a recording session with Son Diamante, where the group was in the process of recording their fourth album. They have been lucky enough to be invited to tour in Europe a number of times, and were able to pay a local musician for the use of his home studio for the recording sessions.

I spoke with bass player José Luis, who told me that his first experience playing around Santiago was in the backup band of a vocal ensemble, performing jazz, R&B, and soul-influenced material. The group broke up, and José Luis formed Son Diamante with some other Santiagueros, all of whom are under the age of thirty, in 1997. They told me that bomba-style breaks started showing up in septetos in Santiago about five years ago, when they were already standard in timba bands.

Las Perlas del Son

Recorded July 26th, 2004, Santiago de Cuba.

Las Perlas del Son, who perform five days a week at a relatively new venue called Patio Artex, have gained national recognition as one of the only all-female septetos. The group was founded in 1995 by bassist Rosa María López, who was at the time the only experienced musician of the group. The other members left jobs as school teachers, lawyers, and actresses, to become members of the group, which they built from the ground up.

Now the group is in its fourth generation of players, as earlier members left to pursue family, career, or even a life outside of Cuba. The

group has become something of a launch pad for local women looking for opportunities to make dollars and get the opportunity to travel. All of the current members, with the exception of Rosa María and the bongocera (María) learned their instruments in the context of group, under the instruction of Rosa María and other senior members.

Perlas has been fortunate enough to tour Europe, Mexico, and Australia, where they have wowed audiences with their charismatic stage presence, choreography, and tight arrangements of son classics by Miguel Matamoros, Francisco Repilado, and Sindo Garay, to name a few.

The arrangements seem perfectly tailored to performances for foreign audiences. Although the repertoire is strongly rooted in the works of prominent Santiagueros, the band performs almost everything at lightning tempos. Many tunes have tempo changes and double time sections, making them fun for listening, but difficult for dancing.

The signature sound of Perlas lies in their vocal arrangements. Since one of the original members was a secondary school choral director, her knowledge was applied generously to the standards that would become the group's mainstays. In their arrangement of the tune "El Que Siembra Su Maíz," they create a vocal substitute for the mambo or diablo that obviously stems from Western choral writing (example 26).

Rosa María, who handles the instrumental side of the arrangements, frequently uses changes in tempo or groove to add excitement to these tunes, many of which are being played up and down the block by countless tourist-

oriented bands. She told me that she immediately saw the need to do something different, and this has typically taken the form of unexpected turns in the song structure; sometimes songs speed up or slow down, change meter, or drop out to just the voices. Example 27, the introduction to “Sabor a Caney,” shows a few examples from Rosa María’s bag of tricks. It starts slow, but goes to double-time at the entrance of the voices. The instruments drop out, foregrounding the close harmonies in the vocals.

This example reveals Perlas del Son’s loyalty to classic styles as well. In this and a number of other arrangements, slower sections of the tune use a much more classic groove. The tres plays the melody and the bass sticks to a straight bolero pattern (see above). Although the group’s arrangements offer some refreshing twists on these standards, they stay away from overly modern harmonies. The example here is dissonant, but not in the same way that Son Soneros used dissonance. There are no jazz inflected vocals or major-7th tonic sounds to be found here.

This is not to say that the group’s sound is completely disconnected from contemporary styles. Rosa María confesses to being a long-time fan of salsero Rubén Blades, and the group’s incorporation of one of his well-known coros into their arrangement of “El Que Siembra Su Maíz” is proof (example 28; the coro from Blades original tune, “Pedro Navaja,” can be heard on CD track 24).

Moneda Nacional

Recorded July 1st, 2004, Havana.¹⁹

Moneda Nacional was the winner of the Festival de Septetos in Havana. Its sound is much more stylistically conservative than some of the other groups that competed, in that it does not stray too far from son montuno form or use any jazz or timba riffs, but it also would never be confused for a classic son group, either. Although it does make occasional reference to classic son in its arrangements, it is the quintessential contemporary septeto: very solid, very energetic, and extremely swinging.

Of the groups that I analyze here, Moneda Nacional is the only one to incorporate a tumbadora in the ensemble. This element is immediately noticeable in the overall groove of the group, making the percussion sound much fuller and more “macho,” as Cubans would describe it. The inclusion of the tumbadora is not unique to Moneda Nacional, however. Many groups prefer to include an extra percussion instrument at the expense of the claves or the trumpet. Moneda Nacional uses a flute instead of trumpet, and the flautista plays claves when the arrangement does not call for flute.

After seeing them at the festival in Havana, I caught up with the group a few weeks later in Santiago, at their regular gig playing the café of Hotel Casa Granda. Daniel Cos, the tresero, showed me that the key to his tres

¹⁹ I recorded Moneda Nacional a number of times in Santiago as well, but the clearest recording is of their performance at the Festival Nacional de Septetos, in Havana.

sound was a very strong right-hand technique. Rather than trying to play piano-style montuno patterns like Ilián Torres, he sticks to relatively simple 2-bar patterns but fills them in with continuous double-picking (example 29). Unlike Félix Godón, Cos' style is much more even, giving his montuno the sound of continuous eighth-notes. This contributes to the band's rock-solid swing, since the tres, tumbadora, guitar, and maracas all effectively play continuous eighth-note patterns.

Cos is one of few treseros I met who tunes his tres like the highest three strings of a guitar (gG-bb-Ee, rather than gG-cc-Ee). When he first got interested in learning to play the tres, almost all of the musicians in Santiago were really interested in nueva trova, and everyone was tuning their treses like guitars in order to be able to learn guitar lines from Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanes records. Cos never played much nueva trova himself, but since that was what was in style, he learned to play the tres in the popular tuning of the moment.

Although Cos, about 60, is the oldest member of Moneda Nacional, he is not the senior musician in terms of his playing experience. His first career was as a high school English teacher, but after the start of the Special Period, it became clear to him that he would never make a decent living on just a teacher's salary. Like many Cubans, Cos' family was forced to seriously take stock during the early nineties. He made the decision to stay and make things work playing music, but half of his family, including his daughter, made the decision to move with relatives to Miami.

Tony, the lead singer, although a good 30 years Cos' junior, has had much more experience singing in dance bands. Before the Special Period, he sang in a big charanga band that played regularly across the country and on television. He told me that a lot of his friends, all of whom had graduated from conservatories, had a hard time getting used to the idea that smaller traditional bands could make more money, since they had always looked down on son and trova as being "música inculta" (uneducated music).

Nowadays, the competition in Santiago is fierce. Despite having won the Festival de Septetos, Moneda Nacional is still an underdog in Santiago. More successful bands, like Septeto Naborí and Son Diamante have been able to get contracts touring abroad, and were not interested in traveling all the way to Havana to perform for free (the prize for the Festival was a handmade guitar – a valuable prize for many musicians, but not much in comparison with a European tour). When I spoke with Daniel and Tony, they told me that a plan to tour Sweden was "under discussion," but it seemed clear that they were not confident at all about the chances of it working out.

Still, the band has an incredible swing, even compared to Son Diamante, and while its sound may not be as eclectic as that of Son Soneros, the arrangements make good use of all the band's resources. Like other groups, Moneda Nacional uses the voices to substitute for horns, as in the introduction to "Si No Te Vea" (example 30).

This use of voices is similar to that of Septeto Machín, but Moneda Nacional is a bit more swinging. As Washburne (1998: 171) points out,

adhering too closely to the clave can cause a phrase to lose its “rhythmic vitality.” Septeto Machín’s introductions are constructed fairly literally on the clave (see example 18), while Moneda Nacional’s introduction to “Si No Te Vea” (example 30) creates rhythmic tension by layering the straight rhythm of the vocal harmony, the anticipated bass pedal, and the flute melody against the clave. This tension is finally released in measure 5, when the bongocero switches to the bell, and the tres joins the flute in a unison line that emphasizes the clave.

Having a tumbadora in the band enables Moneda Nacional to more gracefully incorporate guaguancó elements. Later in “Si No Te Vea,” the bass and tumbadora briefly switch to the guaguancó “composite melody” (see earlier in this chapter). The change occurs for only a few bars, but creates a noticeable rhythmic shift (example 31).

Like Las Perlas del Son, the members of Moneda Nacional feel a sense of pride and responsibility toward traditional son. Although the overall swing of the band is very contemporary, with songs performed at fast tempos and arrangements that echo larger dance bands, the band also incorporates elements of classic son. “La Raya Rumbero” starts with a standard break like the one heard on “Caballeros, Silencio,” by Sexteto Habanero (example 32; also see example 3b).

This is a good example of the way Moneda Nacional can simultaneously sound very traditional and very inventive at the same time. Its sound on “La Raya Rumbero” is very fast, energetic, and swinging, and its

use of vocals to substitute horn lines recalls the big conjuntos and charangas of the 1950s. But at the same time it incorporates a very common classic son break. Later in the same tune, a classic-style legato vocal passage is combined with a guaguancó diana played by the flute (example 33).

These combinations are fairly common in contemporary septetos. In general, as with both Septeto Machín and Moneda Nacional, septetos freely incorporate familiar melodies, rhythms, and formal structures from son montuno, rumba, and classic son, and do their best to expand the possibilities of their relatively limited format. What sets Moneda Nacional apart from other groups, and what contributed to its success at the festival in Havana, is its fluency with a wide range of Cuban popular music, rather than progressive or innovative arrangement techniques. Because of this, it is a success as a traditional group even though its sound is very contemporary.

Cañambú

Recorded July 30th, 2004, Santiago de Cuba.

As a well known story goes, back in 1940 in the town of San Luis, north of Santiago, one of the Ruíz Boza brothers noticed that the bamboo stalks used to carry water throughout the village made a resonant, hollow sound when dropped. Since none of the villagers could afford musical instruments, building some out of the local *cañambú* (a variety of cane that grows thick and tall all around San Luis) seemed like the next best thing (Cañambú, interview).

It was then that the group called Cañambú was founded, launched by

their first regional hit “Cañambú con Los Cinco Hermanos.” Until recently, the group was still led by the last surviving member, Arístides Ruíz Boza, who retired in 2002. The group is currently under the leadership of Andrés Cardona Alemán, who joined the Ruiz Bozas in 1978 and helped bring Cañambú to the attention of national concert organizers. Since then, Cañambú has become something of a legend as the only “all-bamboo” septeto (actually, the tres is really made of wood, but it is coated with a layer of bamboo to match the rest of the band).

The band gets its signature sound from the use of two percussion instruments of Ruiz Boza’s invention, the *bajo percutivo* (percussive bass), and the *bongó cañambú* (cane bongó). The bajo percutivo consists of a 6-foot piece of hollowed cane tied to two shorter pieces. It is played by simply dropping it on the ground, which produces a resonant thud. The lengths of cane are very precisely cut, and the group members told me that the three tones produced approximate an A major triad (although in performance these pitches are not clearly audible).

The bongó cañambú consists of two small pieces of the same type of cane cut in two different lengths, which the player strikes against a wooden stool. These are also very specifically cut to mimic the sounds of the macho and hembra heads of a normal bongó.

The use of bamboo stalks of differing lengths as percussion instruments is not without precedent. The ‘Are’are people of the Solomon Islands use bamboo stamping tubes to create complex polyrhythmic textures

(see ‘Are’are 1997, in discography). Cañambú’s founders may have been influenced by Trinidadian Tamboo Bamboo bands, the precursors to steel drum bands, which were popular in Trinidad until around the 1920s (Brown 1990: 87-92; see Various Artists 1956 in discography).

The recordings here are from the Cañambú’s steady gig at Casa de Las Tradiciones, a small venue in the famous Tivolí neighborhood of Santiago. When I first arrived, the lead singer, Ramón Suárez, proudly announced to the mostly tourist crowd: “This is Cañambú, the *real* Cuban son!”²⁰

When I was able to interview the bandmembers a few days later, they told me that they were committed to playing their music as it has always been played. Cardona, the director, told me he has not changed the repertoire very much in the 28 years that he has been playing with the group, because he does not want to lose the “essence, the special stamp (*sello*)” of the group’s sound (Cañambú, interview). They scoffed at the other so-called “traditional” groups who play around Santiago.

The problem is... for example, in the center of town there, two septetos might play and you can’t tell which is Juan and which is Pedro! Why? Because they’re all playing the same thing! (Ramón Suárez, Cañambú interview)²¹

²⁰ “¡Esto es Cañambú, el verdadero son Cubano!”

²¹ “El problema es que...por ejemplo, en el centro del pueblo allá, tocan dos septetos, y tú no sabes cual es Juan y cual es Pedro, ¿por qué? Porque están tocando lo mismo!”

We see everyday how these other groups play, and it's basically popular [contemporary] music...They're forgetting a little bit what the *essence* of the tradition, the roots... We don't want to lose that (Andrés Cardona Alemán, *ibid.*)²²

These other groups, they play a lot of stuff mixed together. Our thing is much simpler, much more natural. This son smells of palm trees, of sugar cane, of grass, of the mountains. This is our son (*ibid.*)²³

I was not surprised by this attitude, having heard the group. Its style is very close to classic son, incorporating repertoire from classic recordings, classic tres guajeos, and even singing like the classic singers. I was struck by how much Ramón Suárez sounds like Abelardo Barroso, with his high, nasal vocal timbre.

Rather than sticking to the tried and true list of tourist songs, Cañambú sticks to tunes written by original members of the band, and songs by classic septetos like Nacional and Habanero, many of which are even considered a bit esoteric by Cuban standards. I was surprised to hear a quite faithful rendition of Sexteto Habanero's tune "Aquella Boca," including the

²² "Nosotros lo vemos diario, como los demás grupos hacen su música, que casi ya es popular...Se olvida un poco de lo que es la *esencia* de lo tradicional, de la raíz...Nosotros no queremos perder eso." Italics represent emphasis on the part of the interviewee.

²³ "Esos otros grupos hacen mucha bomba, mucha fusión, mucha mezcla. Lo nuestro es mucho más sencillo, muy natural...Este son huele a palma, a caña, a hierba, a monte. Este son es de nosotros."

standard tres intro in the classic style (example 34). The rest of the tune follows the same form as the original, and remains at a comparable tempo as well.

Suárez explained to me that the group feels a responsibility to preserve the works of composers who, despite having profoundly influenced Cuban son in its early years, are for whatever reason not being performed anymore. In this regard, Cañambú could be described as representatives of a “residual tradition,” (Williams 1977: 120), whose cultural values were at one time connected to dominant cultural forms but are now marginalized.

While the group occasionally takes a request from audience members, Cardona expressed his weariness for this sort of thing:

Let me tell you: we play mostly in hotels, and tourists will come up and say [in a high-pitched voice] ‘What about “Son de La Loma”? What about Chan Chan?’ because they always come from Havana first, toward Oriente, all along hearing all the groups play all the same things! When we play, people clap and dance, and really have a good time!²⁴

The group’s sound, which they call *son campestre* (country son), makes

²⁴ “Déjame decirte que, nosotros tocamos en hoteles, y viene el turista y dice ‘Y el “Son de la Loma”? Y el “Chan Chan”? porque siempre vienen desde la Habana, hacia Oriente, ¡oyendo los mismos y todos grupos con la misma cosa! Cuando nosotros tocamos, la gente aplauda y baila, ¡y gozan bien!

a good case for the popular theories suggesting son's descendence from changüí.²⁵ The bajo percutivo plays on the last quartet note of every measure, like a marímbula, and on certain faster tunes, the bongó cañambú seems to imitate the *despedida* pattern played at the end of changüí compositions (example 35).²⁶

Manuel Alemán's bongó cañambú style is very similar to changüí styles, just like Sexteto Habanero's first bongocero "El Chino" Incharte (see above). Over the years, the group has learned to use Alemán's flashy playing style to their advantage, featuring at least two raging solos in each set (example 36). Alemán has a whole routine worked out, starting the solo on the top and sides of his wooden stool, and then moving to the dance floor, where, surrounded by dozens of cheering tourists, he plays on his back while hitting the canes against the tile floor. This is usually a very effective routine, and typically after a solo Suárez will take the opportunity to remind the crowd about Cañambú's CD.²⁷

²⁵ Lapidus (2002) notes that local accounts of traditional music are often very linear, tracing the emergence of son from older styles, such as *nengón* and *kiribá*, by way of changüí. As noted earlier, similarities are found in the fluid playing style of early son bongoceros. Lapidus also suggests that the classic tres intro might be a simplified version of the *paso de calle*, an arpeggiated pattern in the tres that signals the entrance of vocals in changüí.

²⁶ See Lapidus (2002) for detailed transcriptions of changüí performance styles.

²⁷ See photos 9 and 10 in Appendix B.

For all of the group's revivalist rhetoric, however, it is interesting to note that after 64 years in existence, the group added a standard double bass and the occasional use of a standard bongó only in 1993. In Cardona's words, this was to give the group a "stronger, more perfect sound" (Cañambú interview).²⁸ Cardona felt that the addition of a double bass in particular would give them more flexibility in terms of what keys and what kind of chord progressions they could play (since the bajo percutivo only plays an A-major chord), but one wonders why the group waited more than fifty years to make this change. The year, 1993, corresponding with the legalization of the dollar and the beginning of the tourist boom, suggests to me that Cardona might have made the change in order to make the group more tourist friendly, enabling them to play at least the occasional request for "Chan Chan" (which they did eventually play the night that I saw them). However, this was never confirmed by any of the group members.

Conclusion

The groups analyzed here were chosen to highlight both the great variety and the common characteristics of many groups I encountered over the course of my fieldwork. I stress that all of the groups I encountered, including those discussed here, as well as others like Estrellas del Son and Innova (discussed in Chapter 1), strive to develop their unique *sello* (stamp) in order to stand out in incredibly competitive environments.

²⁸ "...un timbre más fuerte, una sonoridad más perfecta."

However, as these analyses show, there are definite regional identities at work in the performance styles of these groups. In Havana, young players like José Graciela and Ilián Torres take generous helpings of timba, while Son Soneros create a new style of son-R&B fusion. Even fairly straight-ahead son montuno groups like Septeto Machín employ a rhetoric of modernity when talking about their approach to the music.

In Santiago, musicians are no less creative and competitive than in Havana, but their aesthetic has a marked “sonero” stamp. While the use of bomba breaks seems inevitable, given the overwhelming popularity of timba, jazz influences are fewer and farther between. Although bands like Moneda Nacional and Las Perlas del Son draw from a wide range of styles, they are more consciously emphasizing the *cubanía* (roughly “cubanness”) of their sound, turning to rumba, classic son, and even Western choral writing, rather than jazz, for inspiration. Meanwhile, groups like Cañambú hope that their claims of lineage and authenticity will give them an edge in the increasingly competitive tourist market.

The economic crisis in Cuba has radically affected performance styles, both through the simple addition of a wider range of musicians to the field, and through stylistic choices made by musicians to address issues of authenticity and identity. Musical sound is thus inherently connected to larger social and economic factors, and can be used as a lens through which to view the larger social context.