

# **BUENA VISTA IN THE CLUB**

*Rap, Reggaetón, and Revolution in Havana*



**GEOFFREY BAKER**

# **BUENA VISTA IN THE CLUB**

## **Refiguring American Music**

*A series edited by Ronald Radano and Josh Kun  
Charles McGovern, contributing editor*





**Geoffrey Baker**

# **BUENA VISTA IN THE CLUB**

***Rap, Reggaetón, and Revolution in Havana***

*Duke University Press Durham and London 2011*

© 2011 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by C. H. Westmoreland

Typeset in Chaparral with Gill Sans by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

Frontispiece: "Los Paisanos in Buena Vista, Havana," photo by Alex Lloyd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data appear on the  
last printed page of this book.

***Para los raperos y raperas de Buena Vista***





Revolution is a sense of the historical moment; it is to change everything that needs to be changed; it is full equality and freedom; it is to be treated and to treat others as human beings; it is to emancipate ourselves through our own efforts; it is to challenge powerful dominant forces within and outside the social and national sphere; it is to defend values in which one believes at any cost; it is modesty, unselfishness, altruism, solidarity and heroism; it is to fight bravely, intelligently and realistically; it is never to lie nor to violate ethical principles; it is the profound conviction that there is no force on earth capable of crushing the strength of the truth and ideas.—FIDEL CASTRO

It's true, it's a sense of the historical moment, and it's to change everything that needs to be changed. . . . So who is counterrevolutionary, someone who's pushing for change so that we can move forward, or someone who's kept us frozen in time for fifty years?—EL B OF LOS ALDEANOS







## CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments* xi

**Introduction** 1

**1 ¡Hip Hop, Revolución!**

*Nationalizing Rap in Cuba* 33

**2 The Revolution of the Body**

*Reggaetón and the Politics of Dancing* 108

**3 The Havana You Don't Know**

*Urban Music and the Late Socialist City* 178

**4 Cuban Hip Hop All Stars**

*Transnationalism and the Politics of  
Representation* 244

**Conclusion**

*The Rise and Fall of Havana Hip Hop* 334

*Notes* 365

*Bibliography* 383

*Index* 401





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After seven years of visits to Havana, the list of people who have helped me, in ways large or small, is dauntingly long. I am especially grateful to the following, without whose support or cooperation my research would not have been possible:

Jessel Saladriga Fernández (Mr. Huevo), Randee Akozta, Miguelito, Explosión Suprema, Doble Filo, Rebeld' Malcoms, Papá Humbertico, Hermanos de Causa, Los Aldeanos, Papo Record, Alexánder Guerra, Obsesion, Isnay Rodríguez, Anónimo Consejo, Barón González, Ogguere, El Adversario, DJ Vans, Clan Completo, Omega Kilay, El Discípulo, Anderson, Raudel (Escuadrón Patriota), Rubén Marín, Silvito "El Libre," Yimi Konklaze, DJ Micha, Unión Perfecta, Cuentas Claras, Kumar, El Poeta Lírico, El Enano, Champion Records, Carlos (TC Records), Alexánder Delgado, Nando Pro, El Micha, Jorge Hernández, Triángulo Oscuro, Ariel Fernández, Roberto Zurbano, Rodolfo Rensoli, Jorge Enrique Rodríguez, Williams Figueredo, Fernando Rojas, Alpidio Alonso, Guille Vilar, Lourdes Suárez, DJ Manu, Nehanda Abiodun, Pedro de la Hoz, Yelandi "El Yela," Eduardo Djata, Mercy, Aris, Cintia, Harry Belafonte, Raquel Z. Rivera, Joshua Bee Alafia, Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi, Jauretsi Saizarbitoria, and Clyde Valentin. My apologies for the inevitable omissions.

Special thanks to Alex Lloyd, Oscar Castillo (Bambú), and Melisa Rivière/Emetrece Productions for allowing me to use their wonderful

photos; to Sophia Blackwell for invaluable editorial assistance; and to Pablo Herrera for many enlightening conversations, opening doors for reggaetón research, and help with translations.

I am grateful to the British Academy, which funded the majority of the fieldwork for this project via its Small Research Grant scheme; Royal Holloway, University of London, for providing me with the sabbatical during which much of this book was written; the Arts and Humanities Research Council, for providing further sabbatical funding via the Research Leave scheme; and Columbia University, for welcoming me as a visiting scholar.

My thanks to all at Duke University Press, especially Valerie Millholland, Miriam Angress, Tim Elfenbein, and Jeanne Farris; to Ron Radano and Josh Kun, editors of the series *Refiguring American Music*; and to the anonymous readers of my manuscript.

Earlier versions of chapters 1 to 3 were published as “¡Hip Hop, Revolución! Nationalizing Rap in Cuba,” *Ethnomusicology* 49, no. 3 (2005), 368–402; “*La Habana que no conoces*: Cuban Rap and the Social Construction of Urban Space,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 15, no. 2 (2006), 215–46; and “The Politics of Dancing: Reggaetón and Rap in Havana, Cuba,” in Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez, eds., *Reggaeton* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009). My thanks to the relevant publications and editors.

**SO I MET WITH FIDEL.** We were supposed to have met for roughly forty minutes—a quickie lunch in the Palace of the Revolution. He was having a series of other meetings. And we started to get into some pleasantries and I said, “I’ve got something I’d like to put before you,” and started to talk about hip hop. . . . And I told him that I thought they’d made a big mistake in not recognizing something as global, as powerful, as this art form and that I thought that it would enhance the thinking of young Cubans, give them a platform on which to find international identity and . . . a place in which, as part of a new cultural order, to have a comfort zone in what was going on globally. And that for Cuba not to be part of that was a gross error on their part. I’d not often talked to Fidel Castro that way, only when I felt strongly about something. . . .

And as we got into this conversation, somewhere I saw that Fidel Castro was really caught. He had a number of appointments; the very next appointment from our brief lunch was that he was going to the graduation class of some 4,000 doctors who had taken some special training. . . . And he said, “you’re going with me,” and I said, “OK, where to?,” and he said, “wherever I have to go—this conversation has just begun.” And for the next eleven hours I went with him in his car—I call it the Wild West trips—to the next venue; he did his speeches with the university students, he asked me to come and say some words to them and I was amused, I enjoyed it, and I spoke to them, and the minute we got into the car, [puts on Spanish accent, imitating Fidel] “now about this hip hop. . . .”

I could tell that Fidel was excited, I could tell he was hearing something that he needed to hear and wanted to hear.

HARRY BELAFONTE, *singer, actor, and activist,*  
*on his 1999 meeting with Fidel Castro*





## INTRODUCTION

Whether or not *Buena Vista Social Club* represents the meaning of life, as Terry Eagleton (2007, 172) implies, it has been hugely influential both in Cuba and around the globe. The 1997 album, a collaboration between the American guitarist-producer Ry Cooder and a number of (mainly elderly) luminaries of Cuban popular music, went on to become the most successful world-music album of all time, and, along with Wim Wenders's 1999 follow-up documentary of the same name, it changed the way the world saw Cuban music and the way Cuban musicians saw themselves. The rapper Telmary spoke for many young musicians when she ended a concert at La Floridita in London in 2007 with the words "we are here representing the new generation of Cuban music—so that you know that it's not all the Buena Vista Social Club!"<sup>1</sup> Yet Telmary had starred in the 2004 Buena Vista Social Club (BVSC) docudrama "sequel," *Música Cubana*, rapping over one of the original film's hits, "Chan chan." In 2006, her former band, Free Hole Negro—like her, from the Havana barrio of Buena Vista—had released the song "Caballeros para el monte," based on the BVSC track "El carretero," on their rap-fusion album *Superfinos Negros*. These artists were taking their cue from Havana's most famous rappers, Orishas, who included "537 C.U.B.A.," a rap version of "Chan chan," on *A lo Cubano* (1999), thus translating the Buena Vista experience for club-goers around the world within two years of the original album's release. BVSC also



reached out into some unlikely spheres of Cuban music: Anónimo Consejo, the epitome of “underground”<sup>2</sup> hip hop in Havana, put out “Aquí sí hay,” a cover of “Candela,” on their 2008 demo *Los Nuevos Inquilinos*, and even reggaetón, a genre usually considered the polar opposite of Cuban traditional music, got in on the act. The Swedish “Cubatón” project resulted in a docudrama titled “The Children of Buena Vista”: the producers marketed Cuban reggaetón by creating a somewhat far-fetched intergenerational tie-in, merging the brash electronic internationalism of its young producers with the global brand recognition of elderly Cuban *soneros*.

The BVSC has framed perceptions and discussions of Cuban music since the late 1990s, whether today’s younger musicians identify with it as a source of national pride and/or commercial success; against it, through ironic twists like that of the rap-metaller Mala Bizta Sochal Klu; or both, as in the case of Telmary.<sup>3</sup> Even when trying to break free from it and represent (or re-present) Cuban music in other ways, musicians, producers, and writers know it is the primary lens through which international audiences observe Cuba, and therefore a useful point of reference. Joaquín Borges-Triana saw the award of a Latin Grammy to Orishas in 2003 for their second album, *Emigrante*, as an important moment for alternative Cuban music: “When almost the whole planet associates Cuban music exclusively with the retro phenomenon that is the Buena Vista Social Club, as though musical time in our country had stopped in the 50s, one group of creators is committed to difference.”<sup>4</sup> Yet Orishas’ first album had included their “Chan chan” cover, while “Mujer,” the second track on *Emigrante*, begins with the sound of crackling vinyl, a sonic index of a retro feel. This illustrates the ambivalent yet central position of BVSC in popular music in Havana: while artists and commentators seem eager to escape its orbit, they keep returning to mine it for musical and intellectual reference points. At times, the push and pull of BVSC seems inescapable. Perhaps Terry Eagleton is right.

### **Buena Vista Social Club to Buena Vista Crew**

A notable feature of Wim Wenders’s BVSC film is the way it puts a distance between the musical cultures of Cuba and the United States at the same time that it draws them together. Focusing on the musical styles and stars of the 1940s and 1950s, it projects an image of an “island that time forgot” and a musical culture whose isolation ensured a stark differ-

ence from that of the United States at the turn of the millennium. Ry Cooder is featured as an explorer who travels through space and time to find a musical “lost world” in Havana; the Cuban musicians who visit New York at the end of the film are captured as bewildered innocents, relics of an earlier age. The first images of the film underline the political division of the early 1960s; the last images show Cooder bridging the divide through music, yet that distance—key to the project’s popular and commercial success—is simultaneously underscored by the film’s narrative and symbolism. While reflecting a very real gap, the result of political decisions on both sides of the Florida Straits, at the same time the film omits any reference to the historical interconnectedness of the music of the two countries, which can be traced back to the nineteenth century; indeed, the two “symbolic capitals” (Quiroga 2005, 3) of the film—Havana and New York—have particularly intertwined musical histories, of which the exchanges of the BVSC film are just one of many examples.<sup>5</sup> As Lise Waxer (1994, 141) writes: “Havana and New York are seen as two points of creativity in a circular process, each one responding, either directly or indirectly, to changes in the other.” Cuban music has repeatedly provided fuel for modern popular music styles in New York, playing a vital role in the development of jazz in the 1940s and the evolution of the characteristic Latin styles of mambo and salsa. The music heard in the Havana social clubs of the 1940s and 1950s, meanwhile, was significantly influenced by North American popular music, especially big band jazz, and much post-1959 music has incorporated elements from U.S. doo-wop, funk, and rock. Havana and New York have long been favorite dance partners, and *Buena Vista in the Club*, like its illustrious forebear, is a transnational story with this axis at its heart.

In the late 1990s, while aging Cuban stars were seducing audiences in New York (once again) with the sounds of *son*, in Havana their grandchildren’s generation was tuning in to a very different beat, one that had originated in the Big Apple: hip hop.<sup>6</sup> As Wenders’s film reveals, the social club of Buena Vista, like other pre-revolutionary black associations, had been closed for decades, yet music had not lost its power to act as a form of social glue. In the 1980s a hip hop scene emerged, initially focused on dance, and over the following decade it became a support network for youths cut adrift by the dislocations of the crisis years after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of its subsidies to Cuba. Ariel Fernández, one of Havana hip hop’s leading voices, described the early 1990s scene as “an

alternative space for the youth at the time that was very necessary. There was a lot of frustration, and this place meant that you belonged to something, that you weren't alone" (*East of Havana* n.d., 150).<sup>7</sup> Loose neighborhood groups coalesced, echoing U.S. hip hop posses—indeed, early Havana hip hop fans identified themselves as “East Side” or “West Side,” New York or Los Angeles. These morphed into local versions—“Costa Norte” (North Coast) and so on—and then into hip hop collectives like the Buena Vista Crew, El Cartel, and La Comisión Depuradora.<sup>8</sup> These contemporary versions of the social club provided a forum for discussion, an outlet for self-expression, and a focus of identification for young Cubans in the city's barrios, with music still the central factor. Like the members of the pre-revolutionary social clubs, 1990s hip hoppers used musical performance and consumption to create social spaces and a public realm on the urban periphery for those left out by the tourism-driven commercialization of the city center.<sup>9</sup> There may be no formal member-

Buena Vista in the Club. Photo by Alex Lloyd.



ship, but there is a notable cohesiveness in this tightly knit scene.<sup>10</sup> Although the hip hop dance scene started out racially mixed, and Havana's first rap stars, SBS, were light-skinned, by the late 1990s a rising current of negritude, fed by North American visitors, had converted the hip hop scene into a focal point of Afro-Cuban social and cultural activity, mirroring the pre-revolutionary social clubs.

Ry Cooder was not the only high-profile American musician visiting Cuba in 1998, the year that he and Wim Wenders were in Havana making their film. The same year also saw the creation of the Black August Hip Hop Collective (BAHHC), a bilateral organization linking Havana with New York, and the visit to the international Havana hip hop festival of the first of several delegations of U.S. activists and "conscious" rappers—including Black Star, Common, The Roots, and dead prez. Simultaneously with the Wenders/Cooder historical preservation mission, more contemporary cultural connections between Cuba and the United States were being forged through revolutionary rap. A month after Carnegie Hall went wild for the old soneros, Mos Def and Talib Kweli stepped onstage at the Alamar amphitheater in East Havana. North American rappers and activists provided a major impetus to the Havana scene and ushered in a boom time for Cuban rap. The presence of these African American musicians in Havana carried echoes of the days when, as the city emerged as America's playground from the 1930s to the 1950s, figures such as Nat King Cole, Sammy Davis Jr., and Josephine Baker graced its stages. But there was also a thread that led back to the post-1959 pilgrimages to revolutionary Cuba by African American radicals like the civil rights activist Robert Williams and the Black Panthers co-founder Huey Newton. The visiting hip hop artists and activists of the 1990s revived the transnational cultural and political connections of earlier periods, simultaneously inspiring and taking inspiration from local developments. If black Cuban musicians had once catalyzed an Africanizing or "Afro-modernist" movement in New York jazz (Ramsey 2003), black American rappers returned the favor, fueling a racializing turn in Havana hip hop.

For all the apparent contrasts of young Cuban rappers in baggy jeans and basketball shirts with elder statesmen like Compay Segundo and Ibrahim Ferrer, the exchange projects organized by the BAHHC mirror the BVSC in more ways than one. Both were deeply nostalgic searches for lost authenticity: Cuba was no longer the source of the new, but rather of the old that had been lost back home. To the international visitors, the

Havana hip hop scene embodied the lost essence of American hip hop, the old-school vibe of the South Bronx “back in the day.” There are close parallels with world-music projects (like BVSC) that are described by Timothy Brennan (2008, 12) as “an escape from the American self.” For Brennan, world music is “at least partly about a longing in the metropolitan centers for what is not Europe or North America. . . . It is, among other things, a flight from the self at the very moment that one’s own culture is said to have become the global norm, as though people were driven away by the image stalking them in the mirror” (ibid., 16). Similarly, as commercial U.S. hip hop became “the global norm” in the 1990s, some North American hip hop activists and intellectuals began to look to other parts of the globe for sustenance.

The sentiments underlying the simultaneous BAHHC and BVSC projects were thus similar: both resulted from and satisfied the cravings of North American intermediaries who longed for “the *not-here*” (ibid.) and whose nostalgic sensibilities were manifested in neotraditionalism. Dissatisfaction with hypercommercialized U.S. culture drove the search for “authentic” world music and “real” hip hop, both of which were “discovered” in Havana—a discovery that involved a significant dose of invention. In both cases, Cuba’s isolation from the United States was seen as having protected it from the ravages of commercialism.<sup>11</sup> Distinguished musicians thus traveled from the United States to Cuba as much to learn as to teach: in both cases there was a sense of pilgrimage, traveling back in time to drink from an unadulterated source.

Havana hip hop drew on both Cuba’s cultural creativity and America’s historical role in its shaping and global mediation. The Havana hip hop festival began as a local affair in 1995, but its internationalization in the late 1990s led to an influx of overseas documentary makers, who ensured the transmission of Cuban rap as much through film as through music. The arrival of foreign music producers led to several key hip hop compilations aimed at overseas consumers, which helped to create an alternative brand of Cuban hip hop to Orishas in the global marketplace. As with the BVSC, the commodification and transnational mediation of Cuban music by foreign musical “explorers” thus emerges as a central concern. In some cases, recording and filming went hand in hand. The *Cuban Hip Hop All Stars* (CHHAS) project recalls Joaquin Cooder’s comment in the BVSC film that the project was the realization of his father’s dream of a bizarre band that never existed; as discussed in chapter 4, the CHHAS album

created sounds never previously heard within Havana hip hop, and the film constructed musical set pieces to support the sound world of the CD rather than to reflect Havana's daily realities. One might even add that all this interest in Cuban musicians, both old and young, from foreign producers, filmmakers, and music entrepreneurs has contributed to a widespread hope within Havana's music scenes for a *golpe de suerte* (stroke of luck) in the form of a foreign impresario willing to fund projects and, ideally, travel abroad. In both cases, tours and concerts in North America and further afield—the highest prize available to Cuban musicians—have resulted from these musical expeditions to Havana. Music documentaries have also, ironically, served as a stimulus to tourism, the most visible face of the commercialism whose supposed absence is celebrated in the documentaries themselves. While the scale of the impact of the BVSC on Cuban tourism was infinitely greater, there is no question that the proliferation of hip hop documentaries—more than twenty-five to date—has helped to consolidate the scene on Havana's alternative, “nontouristy” tourist circuit. Hip hop in Havana, like much contemporary Cuban music, cannot be properly understood without considering the transnational aspects of its production, circulation, and representation.

### **“The Way It Was”:**

#### **An Introduction to Rap and Reggaetón in Havana**

It all began when I was a kid with a bunch of antennae,  
 Clothes hanger wire and a Selena [TV],  
 I put all that junk out the window and, ay, ay, ay!  
 Dying to catch '99 [Jamz]!  
 I caught Soul Train, not fuzzy at all.  
 Out of the way, mom!  
 I'm watching a program,  
 Eyes and ears on stalks.  
 I copied the steps and then in the barrio  
 We started battling,  
 And there were many like me in Havana,  
 Dancing and listening just to American music.  
 Dad bought me a tape player  
 And my first cassette was by Public Enemy.  
 —ALEXEY RODRÍGUEZ (El Tipo Éste),  
 “Como fue” (the way it was)<sup>12</sup>



Alexey Rodríguez of Obsesión performing in London. Photo by Alex Lloyd.

The historical interlinkage of Afro-Cuban and African American musicians was curtailed in the aftermath of the 1959 Cuban Revolution. With the imposition of the U.S. embargo in 1962, the exchange of musicians was reduced to virtually zero. However, in the age of mass media, the flow of popular culture continued, despite the best efforts of the Cuban government to limit exposure to U.S. musical influences and the so-called ideological diversionism that might result. Merchant sailors were an important point of contact with outside musical trends, but even more influential were the radio and TV signals beamed across the Florida Straits from Miami and captured on makeshift aerials hoisted on seaside apartment buildings. Alexey Rodríguez's iconic song "The Way It Was" captures the image of young residents of Havana suburbs like Alamar tuning into *Soul Train* and 99 *Jamz*, grooving to Earth, Wind and Fire, and marveling at the dance steps of Michael Jackson.<sup>13</sup> This image has entered the lore of Cuban hip hop and is a vital part of the story, revealing rap as the latest manifestation of a Cuban fascination with American music that goes back through funk, soul, and rock 'n' roll to jazz: hip hoppers' parents and grandparents had had their own transnational infatuations.<sup>14</sup> The hip hop kingpin Ariel Fernández told me: "Hip hop didn't come from nothing—it came because it is a tradition that people

are always trying to be on top of the new type of music coming from the U.S.” His choice of words is revealing: a love of American modernity is a Cuban tradition.

Less well known is the “alternative” origin story of the BVSC. The film plays up Ry Cooder’s role as originator of the project, at the expense of local “point man” Juan de Marcos González, who has since attempted to put the story straight. He talked about tuning into Miami radio stations in the 1970s, listening to the funk and soul that would inspire the first generation of Havana hip hoppers, but fixating primarily on Carlos Santana’s music (Corbett 2004, 47). Santana’s resurrection of Mexican musical history led Juan de Marcos to begin studying traditional Cuban music, which evolved into the creation of the seminal son “revival” group Sierra Maestra, and from there to the BVSC project he organized for Ry Cooder. The origin stories of the son revival and Cuban hip hop—developments that might appear at opposite ends of the musical spectrum—reveal U.S. media broadcasts in an almost identical role as catalyst.

Images and sounds translated far more readily than lyrics, so it is unsurprising that the first shoots of hip hop culture in Havana in the 1980s took the form of dance styles. Many leading figures in the Havana hip hop scene started out as break dancers, frequenting places like the Parque de los Policias in the barrio of Lawton. Alexey Rodríguez went on to become one of Cuba’s best-known rappers, but his hymn to the Cuban old school is all about the dance. A nascent form of rapping known as *cotorrear* began to emerge at the end of the decade, but most place its crystallization around 1990, the start of the “Special Period in a Time of Peace.”<sup>15</sup> This was the euphemistic name given by the Cuban government to the sudden and profound crisis that engulfed the island with the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of its support for Cuba. It was a time of severe shortages and plummeting living standards. An urgent need for foreign currency ushered in an economic (counter)revolution based on the opening up of Cuba to mass tourism and foreign investment, and the legalization of private possession of dollars. Cuba thus began to operate a dual dollar-peso economy that lasted from 1993 to 2004, when the dollar was replaced by the convertible peso (which did nothing to alter the duality of the economy). Dollars were vital for obtaining most consumer goods and even some domestic staples, yet they were hard for most Cubans to obtain legally: those who had neither one of the few jobs that paid



in hard currency nor family members who sent remittances from overseas found themselves suddenly at a disadvantage, and long-suppressed social and economic divisions returned almost overnight. The new dependence on tourism, too, ensured that the harsh burdens of the 1990s were not shared equally across all sectors of society. The underground economy blossomed, further testing the power and legitimacy of the state (Henken 2005; Ritter 2005). The Special Period, the most far-reaching crisis since the 1959 revolution, provides the context in which Cuban hip hop took shape as a cultural phenomenon. Inspired by the militant sounds and images of U.S. rappers like Public Enemy, but also suffering from the sudden unavailability of basic consumer goods, break dancers began to hang up their shoes and instead speak out publicly through rap lyrics about the bewildering changes and hardships that they faced after decades of Soviet-backed stability—scarcity, inequality, corruption, racism, illegal emigration, booming tourism, and prostitution.

While the late 1980s saw the decline and collapse of socialism in the Soviet bloc, it would be a mistake simply to see this as a time when revolution was dying. Rap, a musical form with revolution at its heart, was taking over America and spreading rapidly around the globe. Its most (in)famous group, Public Enemy, known as “the Black Panthers of hip hop,” espoused black Marxist philosophies and turned a new generation on to revolutionary figures such as Malcolm X, Huey Newton, and Assata Shakur. Public Enemy, perhaps more than any other group, became the inspiration for rappers around the globe in the early 1990s, as Alexey’s song “Como fue” suggests. The Soviet Union might have gone, but Marxist revolutionary ideas were in the air (and on the airwaves). Public Enemy’s music, linking hip hop and revolution, provided the catalyst that was later to convert hip hop in Havana from a foreign youth fad to a vanguard manifestation of national culture.

In the early 1990s, the depths of the Special Period, hip hop took a firmer grip on Havana’s youth. In 1990, the huge PabExpo hall was divided into sections for dance events, with one dedicated to *moña* (the general term used for African American popular music, including soul, funk, and R&B, as well as hip hop). After PabExpo came the mobile discos that played *música americana* rather than salsa; the best known was at La Piragua on the seafront from 1992 to 1994, a popular space created by the Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (Union of Young Communists, or UJC)

where young *habaneros* gathered to listen to English-language rap and R&B. Smaller venues where hip hop aficionados came together and danced, such as the Casa Estudiantil in 10 de Octubre, emerged around this time, and the longest-running rap show on Cuban radio, *La Esquina de Rap*, had its first incarnation in the early 1990s. The famous *local* at Carlos III and Infanta, known simply as *la moña*, began putting on hip hop in 1994. These popular spaces were primarily for weekend dance events, and local rappers were slower to emerge, with most recalling only isolated freestylers in the early 1990s. But as the audience for hip hop grew, the first rap groups began to make themselves heard, with figures like Rubén Marín (later of Primera Base) and Yrak Saenz (Doble Filo) leading the way. Official attitudes toward hip hop were contradictory at this time; while many spaces were provided by state organizations (such as the UJC and the community cultural centers known as Casas de la Cultura), hip hop fans were often seen as social misfits, supporters of an imperialist cultural invasion from the United States, and they regularly attracted police attention. Music and dance events were broken up, dancers ran to escape arrest—it was, at least in part, a subculture that thrived on the attraction of the forbidden. This paradoxical combination of state support and restriction has characterized the Havana scene ever since.

By 1995 there were enough rap groups in Havana to merit the organization of a hip hop festival in the East Havana neighborhood of Reparto Guiteras by the collective Grupo Uno, led by the cultural promoters Rodolfo Rensoli and Balesy Rivero. The festival became an annual event; it began to grow in size after the organizers shifted the site to Alamar in 1996 and sought logistical help in 1997 from the state organization for youth culture, the Asociación Hermanos Saíz (AHS), which was to become a key player in the story of Cuban rap. The AHS is technically a non-governmental organization (an NGO), but those who worked for or with the association would always tell me “it is *supposedly* an NGO” or “it is an NGO *in inverted commas*.”<sup>16</sup> It has close ties to the political center: it is under the wing of the UJC—one employee described the two as “thumb and nail”—and two of its former presidents, Fernando Rojas and Alpidio Alonso, went on to occupy high political positions.

While other annual events (such as the Rap Plaza festival) and monthly *peñas* (live performances) sprang up across the city, the center of the late 1990s scene was considered to be the distant East Havana suburb of

Alamar, a huge, postrevolutionary housing estate where both the annual festival and regular peñas were held from 1996.<sup>17</sup> As the live rap scene grew, it attracted increasing attention from Cuban youth, intellectuals, and the state. The 1998 festival featured an important speech in defense of hip hop by Ariel Fernández; this statement, published in the UJC magazine *El Caimán Barbudo* (Fernández 1998), eventually brought forth an official response. In 1999 Abel Prieto, the progressive minister of culture, declared rap to be “an authentic expression of Cuban culture” (quoted in Robinson 2004, 119) and added “it’s time we nationalize rock and rap” (quoted in Pacini Hernandez and Garofalo 1999–2000, 42). He announced: “We have to support our Cuban rappers because this is the next generation of Cubans and they are saying powerful things with this art. I am responsible for giving this generation the freedom to claim their power culturally” (quoted in Hoch 1999), and that year state funding for the hip hop festival increased significantly.

If this marked a turning point in the recognition of rap as a genuine manifestation of Cuban national culture, the late 1990s were also key years from an international perspective. Negotiations between internationalist figures in the Havana and New York hip hop scenes in 1997–98 led to the creation of the Black August Hip Hop Collective and the visits to the Havana hip hop festival by renowned U.S. conscious rappers; equally crucial was a meeting between Fidel Castro and the musician-activist Harry Belafonte in Havana in December 1999 that evolved into a day-long discussion of hip hop, consolidating its arrival at the highest levels of the Cuban government (see prologue). As foreign hip hoppers, journalists, and activists started appearing at Havana events, the traffic also began to flow in the other direction, as the visiting artists were inspired. Mos Def, who traveled to Cuba in 1998, included the track “Umi Says,” set partly in Havana, on his album *Black on Both Sides* (1999). The song alludes to the Elián González case, and its video includes pictures of Cuban demonstrators with signs reading “bring him home.” In 1999 Common performed in Havana, where he met the political exile Assata Shakur, something of a cause célèbre in hip hop: she was Tupac Shakur’s aunt and godmother, a Black Panther who was given props by Chuck D in Public Enemy’s “Rebel without a Pause.” Common released “Song for Assata” on *Like Water for Chocolate* (2000). Perhaps more importantly, the American rappers described their trips to Cuba as moving, even life-

changing, experiences. The impact of Cuban hip hop on its U.S. counterpart is small but significant, the latest in a line of Afro-Cuban cultural and political influences on African Americans that goes back to the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> While many U.S. conscious hip hop fans may not know much about Cuba, their idols like The Roots, dead prez, Common, Talib Kweli, and Mos Def most definitely do, testifying to the mutual influence of U.S. and Cuban hip hop.

The year 1999 also saw the release by EMI of *A lo Cubano*, the globally successful first album by Orishas, a group formed in France by two resident Cuban musicians and two recently arrived members of the Havana hip hop group Amenaza. In the same year, the first compilations of Cuban rap for overseas distribution, *The Cuban Hip Hop All Stars, Vol. 1*, and *Cuban Rap Ligas*, were recorded in Havana. While these albums heralded a boom time for Cuban rap both on the island and abroad, it is worth underlining that success came only with substantial foreign involvement and—in the case of Orishas—a permanent move overseas. Beneath the growing international admiration for Cuban hip hop, structural weaknesses remained: though Abel Prieto and even Fidel Castro were taking an interest, and cultural institutions were increasingly opening their doors, the Cuban media and music industry remained largely resistant to rap, obliging ambitious artists to look abroad. While the Havana scene was becoming a hotbed of ideological and artistic activity and inspiring its North American visitors, on the ground opportunities to make money via conscious hip hop were scarce, meaning that its economic underpinnings were insecure and that most rappers remained poor. Havana's socialist context provided hip hoppers with unusual creative opportunities,<sup>19</sup> but there was a chronic lack of material resources in the Special Period. As a result, foreign involvement was to be crucial in the development of the hip hop scene, opening up new prospects but also raising new questions for local artists as the discrepancy between international recognition and local impecuniousness increased.

A pivotal moment in the flow of hip hop from Havana to the world was the official Cuban rap tour to New York in 2001, organized by the International Hip Hop Exchange (which included many of the Black August activists). For the first time, Havana hip hoppers saw where it all began, yet the enthusiastic reception afforded to the delegation ensured that the Cuban visitors did not perceive themselves as inferior to their American

hosts. The optimism around the Havana scene was captured in an interview in the documentary *Cuban Hip Hop All Stars*, in which Obsesion talk during their New York trip about the support they are receiving from state institutions; they predict that this tour will mark the start of a new phase in Cuban hip hop. Their words were soon realized, though perhaps not quite in the way they had hoped. The dream of financial betterment led one member of the delegation, Julio Cárdenas, to defect just a few days later, at the end of the tour—a small but psychologically significant incident at a time when Cuban artists were being held up as the past and the future of hip hop.

Obsesion were right that 2002 was to be a pivotal year for hip hop in Havana, but their optimism turned out to be misplaced. In September 2002, the Ministry of Culture created the Agencia Cubana de Rap (Cuban Rap Agency, or ACR) and launched a magazine, *Movimiento: La Revista Cubana de Hip Hop* (movement: the Cuban hip hop magazine). Until that year there had been a thriving and relatively cohesive rap scene, with estimates of two to three hundred groups in Havana at its peak. There had been debates over underground versus commercial directions within the scene, but in reality the limited commercial openings ensured that differences were more imagined than real. With the creation of the ACR, however, an institutional divide emerged between the eight to ten professional groups employed by the agency, which had an explicit commercial orientation, and the dozens of amateur groups supported by the AHS, an organization with a noncommercial ethos. The effect was the consolidation and amplification of the tensions between underground and commercial tendencies.

At this time, the nascent commercialism embodied by the ACR was dramatically reinforced by the emergence of a new musical style in Havana: reggaetón, a Spanish-language hybrid of dancehall reggae, and U.S. rap, with roots in Panama and Jamaica but produced primarily in Puerto Rico. Although the music of reggaetón pioneers like the Panamanians Nando Boom and El General had been known for years in Cuba, it had been more influential in and around Santiago de Cuba, so it is little surprise that the first Cuban reggaetón star, Candyman, emerged from the eastern end of the island. His music began to be heard in the streets of Havana at the start of the new millennium, blasting out from the speakers on the back of bicycle taxis (many of whose drivers are reputedly

from eastern Cuba). The consolidation of this new musical wave was marked by the formation of Cubanito 20.02 by former members of the leading rap group Primera Base; within two years they had become the biggest sensation in Cuba, converting the year of their foundation, 2002, into a symbolic watershed of sorts. At its initiation the same year, the ACR included two reggaetón groups, Cubanito 20.02 and Cubanitos en la Red, providing a foothold for reggaetón within not just Cuba's music profession but rap's institutional base. Reggaetón soon grew to dominate the agency's output; rap artists began experimenting with the new style as they saw the popularity of Cubanito and Candyman go through the roof. Reggaetón quickly became far and away the most popular music for young Cubans, offering commercial possibilities within Cuba that had never existed for rap and dramatically transforming Havana's soundscape and musical economy. The relationship between reggaetón and hip hop has been fractious; most of the leading *reguetoneros* (reggaetón artists) emerged from the hip hop scene to great acclaim from the general public, but accusations of selling out have proliferated within hip hop circles. In the eyes of many hip hopers, the combination of rap and reggaetón groups in a single commercial artistic agency damaged the hip hop scene's ideological base, dashing hopes that hip hop would take a leap forward in 2002 and undermining the legitimacy of the agency itself. With the ACR and reggaetón looming large, commercialism was clearly no longer a mirage in the Havana urban music scene.

As a number of first-rank, professional rap artists were moving toward a more commercial or media-friendly stance and style, many amateur rappers were shifting in the other direction, becoming more rebellious, outspoken, and underground. There was another symbolic turning point in 2002: a performance by the rapper Papá Humbertico at the international rap festival which included hoisting a homemade banner with the words *denuncia social* (social denunciation). This act caused consternation among the institutions responsible for the festival. The most obvious consequence was that Papá Humbertico was banned from performing for four months, but several leading figures in the rap scene believe that this was the beginning of the end of the showpiece AHS festival. Similarly, two individuals close to these developments told me that, while the ACR had been in the works for a long time, it was finally inaugurated just weeks after the Papá Humbertico incident as an attempt to bring order to the scene.

It is worth asking why the denuncia social incident carried so much symbolic force—after all, it was simply the name of Papá Humbertico's first demo, and not a particularly outrageous statement in the context of this outspoken youth culture. The reasons are twofold and related: first, it was a visual statement, and second, it was made in front of the world's press. U.S.-based journalists played a significant role in organizing the Black August exchanges, and the booming rap scene and hip hop festivals attracted increasing numbers of representatives of major overseas news organizations, some of them enticed by the notion of a musical counter-revolution in Cuba, ensuring that photographs of Papá Humbertico's banner appeared on newspaper pages and websites around the world the following day. Despite the apparent centrality of the spoken word in rap, visual elements take on greater significance as rap crosses borders, especially linguistic ones. The translation of a few choice lyrics would not have carried the same weight. As it was, Papá Humbertico created an instant global story, and the reaction of the international press, more than anything else, concerned Cuban officials and observers (Henríquez Lagarde 2002). This incident is illustrative of two further points. First, performance context is crucial. Had Papá Humbertico pulled the same stunt at a regular peña, he would probably have received little attention or sanction. Second, the development of Cuban hip hop has been both accompanied and significantly affected by foreign efforts to document it. The foreign gaze was instrumental in both Cuban hip hop's rise to global prominence and its fall from grace.

How to apportion the blame between reggaetón, the ACR, Papá Humbertico, the foreign press, and a lack of common purpose within the rap scene itself is still a matter of debate; less disputed is the fact that Havana hip hop started to go downhill around this time. The last large-scale, summer hip hop festival took place in 2003, and rappers remarked that the audience response was lukewarm in comparison with previous years. The festival was postponed at the last minute in 2004 and suspended by the AHS after the 2005 edition. As reggaetón's popularity soared, a number of leading rap artists switched styles, and hip hop audiences declined substantially; many key hip hoppers left Cuba altogether; and arguments raged over the validity and direction of the ACR, which was derided by those on the inside as well as the outside. El Cartel provided one of Cuban hip hop's strongest artistic statements in 2004, but this effort to orga-

nize leading rappers and producers into a collective proved to be a false dawn: the project was short-lived, and half its participants left the island over the next few years. High-profile tours—such as the visit by La FabriK (Obsesion and Doble Filo) to the United States in 2003, which culminated in a performance at Harlem’s famous Apollo Theater alongside Havana veterans The Roots, Common, and Harry Belafonte—ensured that Cuban hip hop’s stock kept rising overseas, but back home the scene was divided and shrinking.

In 2007, when the live scene was at its nadir, the duo Los Aldeanos, representatives of a new generation of rappers who emerged after the Black August years, brought together dozens of Havana’s most talented underground artists under the banner La Comisión Depuradora (the purifying commission) to spark a renaissance with a landmark double album and two famous concerts. Los Aldeanos went on to become the most important figures in Havana’s hip hop scene over the following three years, backed up by other members of La Comisión Depuradora. Their path was cleared to a certain extent by the ACR, which sent its groups away on regular provincial tours organized by its parent institution, the Cuban Music Institute (Instituto Cubano de la Música, or ICM). There was a gap in Havana, and Los Aldeanos filled it, but they also brought about significant changes to the scene on both practical and ideological levels. Where leading figures of the late 1990s sought to negotiate with state institutions and forge discourses that were acceptable to officials and hip hoppers alike, Los Aldeanos took a distinct approach. Though they began by using the same routes as other underground groups, finding their feet in legitimate (if alternative) institutional spaces like La Madriguera and Parque Almendares, over time they started to follow an increasingly independent path, using different performance venues and digital technology to connect with a wider audience while reducing their reliance on cultural institutions and the media.<sup>20</sup> They became figureheads of two important tendencies of recent years: first, an increased belief in independence, as the AHS’s abandonment of the festival and the bitter history of the ACR led to a loss of faith in state institutions; and second, the need to create a new public after the loss of much of hip hop’s core audience from 2003 to 2006. Los Aldeanos began attracting increasing numbers of people who were not primarily hip hop fans, leading to greater social and racial diversity in the scene. Because their seven-year



career to date exactly matches the span of my research (2003–10), and because they have become the most popular Cuban hip hop group since Orishas while retaining their place at the heart of the Havana scene, they loom large in the following pages.

The hip hop artists with most appeal in Havana at the time of writing, such as Los Aldeanos, Oggueré, Doble Filo, and El Adversario (in his guise as a sideman to X Alfonso, one of Cuba's most famous fusion musicians), are those who have reached out beyond the hip hop scene to the wider, more heterogeneous alternative-music public. While there are still some artists, activists, and intellectuals who maintain the Black August line of the late 1990s and early 2000s, describing Cuban hip hop as a distinct, coherent sociocultural movement with a strong racial character, a major shift has in fact occurred: many members of the new wave of artists and audiences are light-skinned and disconnected from any unifying hip hop ideology, and most of today's successful artists are closer to the culturally, racially, and politically diverse, almost amorphous, alternative-music sphere than to any supposed hip hop movement. The internationalist, race-based alliances of the Black August years have lost ground to more localized, race-blind interactions with the electronic dance-music and rock scenes, which are predominantly white. For example, the dance-music collective Matraka worked closely with La Comisión Depuradora and organized the Puños Arriba hip hop awards in 2009 and 2010. Around 2000, the highlight of the summer for hip hoppers was the Havana hip hop festival at which local rappers, activists, and fans connected with their foreign counterparts; a decade later, it was Matraka's Rotilla Festival, a three-day beach party at which rappers shared top billing with dance-music DJs. At the *Cuerda Viva* awards ceremony in March 2009, the winners of the 2008 award for best rap demo, Los Aldeanos, handed over the prize to the 2009 victors, Doble Filo: three of the four rappers were light-skinned, as were Doble Filo's DJ (the drum 'n' bass specialist DJ Dark), most members of the rock band (Qva Libre) that collaborated in Doble Filo's performance, and most of the large alternative-music audience that cheered both rap groups to the rafters. Things had come a long way from Alamar a decade earlier. One of the aims of this book is to bring these newer but fundamental shifts to the foreground and thereby advance the intellectual framing of Cuban hip hop, which is stuck in a groove laid down over a decade ago.

## Representing Cuban Hip Hop

Enough already with your “I’m an anthropologist, I’m a professor,”  
 With your “Cuban rap has found what was lost in New York.”  
 —RANDEE AKOZTA, “Basta ya” (enough already)

As journalists became a regular fixture at Havana rap festivals starting in 1997, articles on Cuban hip hop began to appear in foreign newspapers and hip hop magazines. Documentary makers from overseas were also drawn to the scene in the late 1990s, with Joe Wentrup’s *Más voltaje, más volumen: rap en Cuba* (1997) the first of an extraordinary wave of film production. In the early 2000s, there were sometimes two or three film cameras running simultaneously at rap concerts, and more than two dozen documentaries have appeared to date. Academic researchers formed part of this wave of foreign interest: Deborah Pacini Hernandez and Reebee Garofalo (1999–2000) were first on the scene, and studies by Alan West-Durán (2004) and a number of doctoral students (M. Perry 2004; Fernandes 2006; Boudreault-Fournier 2008; Saunders 2008) soon followed, with further Ph.D. theses by Melisa Rivière and Marie Laure Geoffray close to completion at the time of this writing. All of this interest cemented Cuban hip hop studies as an academic field. These studies have been supplemented by numerous theses at the master’s and undergraduate levels at North American universities. Foreign students have thus been a regular presence at Havana hip hop peñas for a decade, and such was the boom of interest that there were sometimes several papers on Cuban hip hop at a single U.S. scholarly conference. Rap did not attract nearly as much attention at home as abroad; although there have been valuable critical contributions by scholars such as Roberto Zurbano, Grisel Hernández, and Joaquín Borges-Triana, and articles by Cuban journalists and cultural commentators in national magazines and newspapers, the local scholarship is far outweighed by the global.<sup>21</sup>

I highlight this point because although I intend this book to be a further contribution to the growing canon on Cuban rap, I will also consider why there has been such an explosion of interest in Cuban hip hop, what forms the resulting documents have taken, and how they have impacted their object of study. To a much greater extent than earlier studies, then, I will focus on the generation of knowledge about Cuban urban music within national and international spheres. The degree of

interest in the subject by foreign writers and filmmakers is out of all proportion to its role in the Cuban cultural scene: in terms of audiences and media space, rap has been utterly overshadowed first by timba (Cuban salsa) and then by reggaetón, yet these forms of commercial popular music, the most eagerly consumed by young Cubans, have received considerably less attention from overseas. Cuban rap has excited foreign imaginations in a way that no other musical form other than son—the sound of the BVSC—has done over the last two decades. The enthusiasm for rap and lack of curiosity about reggaetón are revealing of the scholarly agendas that dominate the academic study of popular music, which tend to give greater priority to logocentric, supposedly resistant, niche musical forms than to more widely consumed commercial dance genres (see Coplan 2005, 25).<sup>22</sup> While criticizing sins of omission is often facile, to write about hip hop in Havana in the early 2000s without discussing reggaetón is to present a very skewed picture of urban music. Until now, readers of Cuban hip hop scholarship in English have gotten little idea of the cataclysmic changes that took place in the rap scene during this period. Yet many leading reguetoneros learned their trade in the rap scene, and to relegate them to the margins of scholarly studies of rap or to omit them altogether is to reproduce the ideological position of Havana's underground hip hoppers—that reggaetón is best ignored or dismissed and that it has nothing to do with hip hop—rather than subject that position to the scrutiny that scholars' contributions should properly provide. There are, after all, other ways of looking at the subject: given the number of rappers who have switched styles, hip hop might be seen primarily as a stepping stone to reggaetón, paving the way for the next big musical wave after timba; or hip hop and reggaetón might be regarded as two sides of the same coin since both have deep roots in Jamaica and entail rapping over digitally produced instrumentals.

Underlying foreign representations of urban popular music in Havana and foreign fascination with hip hop is a sensibility that is almost the city's hallmark: nostalgia. Havana is a city in which time seems foregrounded: a "city that time forgot," preserved or merely surviving, full of relics of a past when Havana was the future. As Alexey's song "Como fue" reveals, nostalgia is not a foreign preserve; it is also closely tied both to music and to the rapid changes experienced by habaneros during the Special Period. It is so central to older Cubans' experiences of Havana that its absence

provokes anxiety: the novelist Leonardo Padura Fuentes's critique of reggaetón centers on his nostalgia for musical genres capable of evoking nostalgia (see chapter 2). Hip hop, in contrast, is particularly backward-looking music, its spiritual home being 1970s New York, and many of the North Americans who started frequenting the Havana hip hop scene in the late 1990s were from its most nostalgic wing, the New York underground scene. "Como fue," a rose-tinted look to back in the day, synthesizes the nostalgic desires of locals and foreigners, hip hoppers and tourists: it historicizes relatively recent events (Alexey's dancing days were only a decade behind him) and carries the imprint of the late-1990s old-school revival in New York (discussed in chapter 4), even quoting the first U.S. rap hit, "Rapper's Delight." It has one foot in Havana and the other in New York hip hop—two spaces of nostalgia par excellence. A rather more acerbic view can be found in Randee Akozta's "Basta ya" ("Enough already . . . with your 'Cuban rap has found what was lost in New York'"), which suggests that Havana hip hoppers were well aware of the transnational imaginings and projections that focused on their scene, where foreign visitors turned "a loss in the space of the self into a recovery and a hope in the space of the other" (Medina 2007, 9; see chapter 4). Nostalgia has underpinned the interactions between North American and Cuban hip hop artists, activists, and intellectuals, and it has been a productive force on both sides of the Florida Straits, propelling artistic and political activity and generating numerous visual and verbal representations. It is thus an important frame of reference for understanding the body of knowledge produced about Havana hip hop, which has resulted from a confluence of nostalgic strands in music, politics, and scholarship.

There are many accounts of Havana hip hop already in existence—journalistic, academic, and audiovisual. Scholarly studies have focused on the emancipatory discourses of Cuban hip hop, particularly with regard to gender and race (see Armstead 2007 and Zurbano 2009, in addition to those listed above). If I do not discuss gender, it is because this aspect has been well covered by other writers. The topic of race, too, is well-trodden ground in Cuban hip hop scholarship, and thorough, broadly similar expositions can be found in most sources. In this case, I believe the consensus hides as much as it reveals and that a revisionist glance is worthwhile, one which I essay in chapter 4. Race has never been my main focus in researching Cuban hip hop, but questions have arisen as my

project has developed. Having initially accepted the position set out in post-2000 academic studies, I found a much broader spectrum of responses to the issue of race than I had expected when I embarked on a series of interviews with hip hoppers in 2008. Not only had the number of light-skinned rappers mushroomed during the course of my research, but also various dark-skinned rappers—whose views I had long taken for granted—revealed skepticism about negritude in the Havana hip hop scene, either rejecting it themselves or questioning the sincerity of others. These responses led me to begin interrogating the academic consensus on race and to wonder whether I had not been the only one taking hip hoppers' views for granted. It seemed that, in promoting Cuban hip hop as an impetus for redefining or revolutionizing blackness in Cuba and as a standard-bearer for North American race studies, many scholars had ignored nuances, complications, and dissenting voices.

My aim is neither to repeat nor to synthesize this literature, but to treat it as part of my broad object of study: the production of knowledge through and around hip hop in Havana. I regard Havana hip hop as a field of debate and negotiation occupied not just by hip hoppers and Cuban state functionaries, but also by foreign activists, writers, and filmmakers. Observation and documentation are part of my story because they are part of the hip hop scene: as a group, we have had a significant influence on the development of that scene and—as Akozta's weary lines in "Basta ya" testify—we can no longer be airbrushed from the picture we create.

My aim in this analysis is to illustrate the importance of foreign, and above all North American, interventions in the construction of Cuban hip hop and to suggest that without these interventions (artistic, activist, and academic), driven by nostalgia for what U.S. hip hop once promised to be and by a particularly North American interest in issues of race, Cuban hip hop might have been a less significant cultural phenomenon than it was on both national and international levels. There may be an interesting story about globalization to be found here: many positive accounts stress local inventiveness in adopting and adapting globally circulating cultural forms, but while Cuban hip hop undoubtedly shows the same, it is also notable that the commonly accepted rise and fall of the Havana scene closely mirrors the ebb and flow of North American interest and presence, which peaked around 2000. In some respects, the blossoming of hip hop in Havana reflects as much a North American urge to

find its “not-Us” (not U.S.?) outside its own borders as a Cuban creative reworking. I would also argue that a somewhat hyperbolic tendency in foreign representations of Cuban hip hop has contributed to its success at home and abroad. Robin Moore (1997) has shown how international fascination with Afro-Cuban music in the 1920s and 1930s helped to consolidate its place on the national stage, and there is plenty of evidence that the influx of foreign artists, activists, journalists, scholars, and filmmakers in the late 1990s and early 2000s contributed to a sense among Cuban cultural officials and hip hoppers themselves that Cuban rap should be taken seriously.

When anthropologists start not only to feature in local rap lyrics but also to provoke exasperation and when Havana hip hoppers know their foreign counterparts’ lines by heart, the symbiotic relationship between academia, activism, and hip hop demands attention. As Murray Forman (2004, 3–4) argues, “research and writing, whether in journalistic or academic contexts, is absolutely part of the wider hip-hop culture,” and this is particularly true in the construction of the Havana scene. Foreign documenters have been a constant presence there since 1997, and Cuban hip hoppers read articles about themselves, watch documentaries about themselves, and listen to talks at colloquia about themselves. Foreign filmmakers and writers have become prime conduits for material resources and overseas travel; we have played an important role in mediating the economic, cultural, and human flows in and out of the Havana scene, transforming it with our purchases, donations, and invitations, and representing it overseas through film screenings and conferences. I thus consider researchers and documenters as a subset of the overseas visitors who have been a visible and significant part of the Havana hip hop scene since the late 1990s and have shaped its trajectory and (self-)representation in important ways. While a transnational lens is more or less inevitable in analyzing global hip hop, I am interested not just in the somewhat disembodied flows of music and political inspiration but particularly in the physical presence of significant numbers of foreign individuals within the Havana scene, the influence that they have wielded, and their promotion of this scene within and outside the island. In 2008 there was arguably a more coherent “hip hop movement” at Tanya Saunders’s *El Proyecto* event at Lehigh University, Pennsylvania, which brought together émigré Cuban hip hoppers living in the United States and Europe for talks, panels,

and a concert, than in Havana itself. Melisa Rivière, another Ph.D. candidate, has managed leading groups Los Aldeanos, Silvito “El Libre,” Doble Filo, and Escuadrón Patriota, and she has filmed music videos for Anónimo Consejo and Obsesion. And lest I seem to be washing my hands of the subject, a Cuban rapper defected at an event that I organized in London in 2007. The line between Havana hip hop and researchers from overseas is thus all but nonexistent.

In Los Paisanos’ song “Hace tiempo ya,” Mr. Huevo raps that “hip hop is created in the streets, not in universities.” There is an occasional air of skepticism around the mix of academia and Cuban hip hop: sometimes from Cuban intellectuals (for whom the proliferation of foreign-produced studies can be a source of suspicion), sometimes from rappers (who can feel sidelined by the intellectual activity around the scene), and sometimes from foreign activists (who feel that their grass-roots movement has been hijacked by pointy-headed outsiders). However, critical reflection and intellectual discussion have not been tacked on to Cuban hip hop, but have long been part of it. Knowledge, sometimes referred to as the “fifth element” of hip hop, is particularly important in Havana. Key figures in the hip hop scene such as Pablo Herrera and Roberto Zurbano are academics and have produced scholarly texts on the subject. It was at the University of Havana that Herrera met Pionero Pando, a connection that catalyzed the creation of Orishas, and his experience as a university teacher informed his role as mentor to many leading groups in Havana. The knowledge that he brought came from reading about U.S. hip hop—book learning as much as street knowledge.

Others, such as Ariel Fernández and Rodolfo Rensoli, are perhaps closer to the idea of the organic intellectual. The former, a DJ and promoter, is credited with using his writings to sway the Cuban intellectual and political establishment in favor of rap, and he edited *Movimiento* magazine, with its strong presence of analytical articles by cultural critics and scholars such as Raquel Z. Rivera and Tomás Fernández Robaina. His own contributions to the magazine often stressed the importance of critical, theoretical, and intellectual debate, and he has also spoken at a number of U.S. universities since moving to New York in 2005. More recently, El B and Escuadrón Patriota, two leading voices in the rap scene, told me of the influence on their art of their university studies in psychology. With colloquia, generally lasting two to three days, long forming



Rande Akozta performing in London. Photo by Alex Lloyd.

part of Havana hip hop festivals and symposia, there has been considerable give and take between the intellectual sphere and the Havana scene.

Cuban hip hop may not have been created in universities, but it has received sustenance there. In recent years, its presence on the international scene has taken place to a significant degree in and via universities: several events involving Cuban rap artists from the island and the diaspora have been organized and funded by universities in North America and the United Kingdom, and the makers of Cuban rap documentaries have prioritized universities for their screening tours, illustrating the role of these institutions as a cradle of alternative cultural, social, and political ideas. Indeed, for all Rande Akozta and Mr. Huevo's skepticism about professors and universities, all three artistic invitations to North America and Europe that they received between 2006 and 2008 were to participate in university events. Foreign intellectuals have opened doors for Cuban hip hop and are partners in maintaining its profile in the diaspora.<sup>23</sup>



## Havana Hip Hop Outside In and Inside Out

Although the insider-outsider dichotomy is overly stark when dealing with a globalized cultural form like hip hop—especially in the case of the Havana scene, where foreigners have been protagonists—I still regard myself primarily as an outsider: having learned my moves on the (cobbled) streets of Oxford, hip hop concerts were hardly my natural habitat. I am multiply “outside”: not Cuban, not even North American (which would be second best, given hip hop’s roots); not black or dark-skinned (and therefore something of an interloper, if descriptions of Havana hip hop as a “black space” are taken at face value); not a hip hop head. Certainly I have acquired knowledge, experience, and friendships over seven years that blur this distinction considerably, but this book is a critical analysis of urban music in Havana, not a celebration or a fan’s-eye view.

This places me outside the main current of the production of knowledge about Cuban hip hop. As discussed above, the line between those documenting the Havana scene and the scene itself is often blurred or nonexistent; many of those from overseas are artists and/or activists in the spheres of hip hop and identity politics, while Cuban hip hop figureheads such as Pablo Herrera and Ariel Fernández have written their own accounts. This predominance of visions of Cuban hip hop by individuals with some claim to insider status or with activist intentions has had both positive and negative effects: there are undoubtedly facets of Havana hip hop that are more comprehensible to such observers, many of whom have also helped to raise the profile and prestige of the scene; but equally, outsiders are less susceptible to the “curse of fandom”—the risk that “the commitment of (adherence of? advocacy of?) the scholar to ‘values’ (apparently) inhering in that of which they are writing” (Maxwell 2002, 109) may overshadow the analysis of those values and the context in which they are found. An activist approach brings the possibility of a positive impact on the object of study, and indeed on wider society, while simultaneously rendering the scholarly assessment of both object and impact more challenging. Roberto Zurbano, one of the most perceptive observers of Havana’s hip hop scene and a figure of some importance in its history, considers the sympathy for Cuban hip hop on the part of foreign writers and filmmakers as a complicating factor in attempts to document and analyze it; the desire to construct the Havana scene as a movement

and to see it thrive have led, in his eyes, to mythification, elision, and to a theoretical disconnect from local realities. Ariel Fernández, an even more central figure, stressed to me the importance of remaining neutral, of observing without romanticism, in order to understand Cuban hip hop.

In an insightful article, Raquel Z. Rivera coins the term “liberation mythologies” in her discussion of the symbolic strategies of African descendants in the Americas: “My understanding of these liberation myths draws from Robert Segal’s. . . . definition of myth as a story that may or may not be true. However, what makes ‘liberation myths’ different from just plain ‘myths’ is that their purpose is both to describe the world *and* to change it—change, in turn, is defined in terms of personal and collective liberation from oppression, injustice, sadness and/or fear. In other words, the goal of this myth-making is redemption—individual and collective.”<sup>24</sup> It is not hard to see how such liberation mythologies might be a powerful resource for artists and activists; what is less clear is the place of myths and myth-making in academic research. Havana hip hop is built on its own freedom myths, which developed in dialogue with North American visitors and provided an impetus to continue in the face of material and political difficulties. The potential problem arises when those who document this scene are invested in these same myths. Liberation mythologies are, then, a double-edged sword in a context in which academia overlaps with art and activism. Rivera, both an artist and a scholar, skillfully negotiates this potential conflict through her reflexivity, managing both to deconstruct liberation mythology and to argue for its value. In Cuban hip hop studies, however, the merging of research and advocacy has led to the blurring of the line between reality and myth, and in some aspects academic studies now perpetuate the mythology rather than analyze it. The motivation may be progressive (as Rivera puts it, “the goal of this myth-making is redemption—individual and collective”), but the outcome is problematic. The mythology of the hip hop scene has become the cornerstone of academic studies, which have adopted hip hop discourses rather than examining them: Havana hip hop as a movement, as a black space, as built on Afro-Cuban music; underground and commercial as distinct and opposing faces of hip hop culture; and reggaetón as worthy of little comment, if any. I would suggest that scholars would do better to treat these myths as stories that may or may not be true and as ideologies that motivate artists in their cultural production or bolster their claims on

external support rather than to regard them (and promote them) as incontrovertible fact. The urge to describe the world and to change it is compatible with scholarship, but it needs to be handled with great care if the desire for change is not to distort the description.

Given the timing of my arrival in the Havana hip hop scene, not being an insider was useful. I caught the Cuban hip hop bug in 2003 when I went to my first concert at La Madriguera and saw the Buena Vista rap duo Los Paisanos.<sup>25</sup> Had my research taken place five years earlier, this would have been a very different book because, as many people told me, I had missed the best bit. Everyone has a slightly different take on when that was, but most agree that I missed it. To make matters worse, my arrival coincided with the boom of reggaetón, which was (I was told repeatedly) unoriginal, simplistic, banal, repetitive, and coarse, the worst thing to happen to Cuban music in living memory. It was everywhere, and it seemed to be the reverse of everything that Cuban rap had stood for: morally, politically, and intellectually empty, committed only to ass shaking and money making. Reggaetón was seemingly crushing conscious rap under its fashionably shod heel, and rappers were starting to think about getting out, tempted by the chance to find fame and fortune at last through music via the new style, or to start a new life overseas. I had definitely missed the boat.

Los Paisanos on the steps of the Buena Vista Social Club. Photo by Alex Lloyd.

