

Cuban entertainment legends: all-female Anacaona orchestra



Formed in 1930s Havana, the all-girl orchestra Anacaona achieved world-wide popularity. Cuchito Castro, and eventually her 11 sisters, took on the male-dominated world of "son" music. Son combines the structure and elements of Spanish song, Spanish guitar, African rhythms, and percussion instruments. At the time it was believed women were not capable of playing son. With concerts in 1938 in New York and Paris, along with films in Mexico, Anacaona rose to international fame. Anacaona flourished through the decades, and when the original members decided to retire, a new set of women offered to continue the tradition.

You need not speak Spanish to realize the band's name has a uniquely sensuous sound to it. But who or what is Anacaona? She was the indigenous queen of Quisqueya, the present day Dominican Republic. A woman respected by her tribe because of her artistic talents. She loved to sing and paint. But she ended up being executed because of her anti-colonialist position.

There is nothing tragic about Anacaona's music, and its current sound has nothing to do with the 1932 lineup. This is edgy, propulsive salsa that draws heavily from the '90s style of Cuban music known as timba, which adds an extra touch of syncopation to the beats and an overall patina of instrumental aggressiveness that can push you to the dance floor.

The timba movement is a result of the high level of technique that Cuban musicians mastered in the 1990s. There has always been a lot of different styles in our music. Timba sounds very aggressive in comparison with more melodic rhythms like the bolero or the merengue.

Today Anacaona strives for balance in its repertoire, including a handful of traditional tunes by such venerable composers as Miguel Matamoros and Marcelino Guerra.

In Cuba, we carry music in our blood. Most of us dance, sing and carry the clave that is the fundamental beat in all Afro-Caribbean music.

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