

Afro-Cuban Culture and Influence

The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the African Diaspora greatly contributed to the diverse cultural landscape of Latin America. The people brought from Africa and their proceeding generations created many different communities across Latin America, called *quilombos*, *cimmaron villages*, *manielas*, or *palenques*. In these communities, Afro-Latinos were able to preserve and maintain their own cultural traditions and identities. They practiced their own forms of religion, preserved traditional songs and dances, and played a variety of musical instruments.

In Cuba specifically, few native Cubans survived the disease and the brutality of the colonizers of the 16th and 17th centuries. The ethnic makeup of the island changed during that time, and today racial and ethnic identity in Cuba remains ever-evolving. Cuban national identity is sometimes described positively as a “tropical stew” of Europeans and Africans, along with many other identities such as Americans, Indians, Chinese, and French,



Photo Courtesy of David LeFevor

without any dominating group. However, the legacy of prejudice prevails as many Afro-Cubans are discriminated against, challenging the notion of harmonious ethnic relations in contemporary life.

One element of Cuban cultural life that seems to bridge the gap between ethnic groups is the rich musical traditions found on the island. Afro-Cuban music was once relegated to the slums and associated with working-class black people, but over time was popularized by middle-class intellectuals and assumed as a symbol of Cuba as a whole. “Hovering

somewhere between nationalist valorization and racist stereotype, the movement to advocate and legitimize the traditionally despised music of Cuba’s slums frequently engaged in a complex process of appropriation and cooperation of Afro-Cuban musical forms in order to achieve popular and commercial success both in Cuba and abroad.”¹⁷

The legacy of colonization extends to the realms of language and religion as well. The languages spoken in the region reflect the residue of colonization. Most people in Cuba speak Spanish; however, the language is heavily influenced by slave-trade route Spanish, similar to dialects spoken throughout the Caribbean. Cubans typically associate Catholicism with Spanish colonialism and Protestantism with the United States. Rather than commit to one or the other exclusively, Cubans embrace a variety of religious beliefs from more traditional Christian denominations to indigenous spiritual practices and Afro-Hispanic cultural traditions. *Santería*, a synthetic religion combining various aspects of Catholicism and African tribal religions, survived hundreds of years of colonial repression and still thrives on the island today. It has been so successful, in part, due

¹⁷Henken, T. (2008). *Cuba: A global studies handbook*. 329. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

to its flexibility with other beliefs and adherent's ability to syncretize the religion with Catholic traditions and practices.

Other than santería, there is no part of Cuban culture in which the influence of Africa is more visible than its music. According to Ned Sublette, "music is so essential to the Cuban character that you can't disentangle it from the history of the nation. The history of Cuban music is one of cultural collisions, voluntary and forced migrations, of religions and revolutions."¹⁸ Most influential to the essential nature of Cuban music is *son*, brought west to Havana from the Mambises of Eastern Cuba during the War of Independence in the latter 19th century. Once *son* reached Havana in the early 1920s, it adapted to a more urban style, but its roots reflect a distinctly African sound which utilizes instruments such as the *bongo*, *clave*, two hardwood blocks that are clapped together, and the *tres*, and a call and response type of singing. The popularity of *son* reached an intense level of fame after the 1997 release and phenomenal success of an album produced by American musician and ethnomusicologist Ry Cooder, the *Buena Vista Social Club*, and the subsequent documentary film by German filmmaker Wim Wenders.

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The fall of Communist Soviet Union and withdrawal of financial support to Cuba in the early 1990s began the *Período Especial*, or Special Period, and was a time of severe economic hardship. After the *Período Especial*, Cuban society was more welcoming of art forms such as rap and hip-hop as a way to voice a variety of political complaints. The emergence of Cuban rap, influenced by American hip-hop, despite travel restrictions and lack of media-sharing on the island, exalted and celebrated African heritage in Cuba and discussed racism openly. It is now endorsed openly by the Cuban State and performed annually at the Havana Hip-Hop festival held every year in August.

The musical form most closely associated with Afro-Cuban origins is the *rumba*. Though less widely-known than *son* or *salsa*, *rumba* is thought to have originated in the ports of Matanzas, Cuba amongst the descendants of slaves brought from West Africa to work on the sugar plantations. These slaves formed *cabildos*, or secret brotherhoods, that came together to worship their *orishas*, or deities.

Though there are several varieties of *rumba*, the three most popular are *guagancó*, *yambú* and *Columbia*, each with its own particular drum rhythms. *Guagancó* is considered to be the *rumba* of the streets, which is performed as a metaphorical mating between a rooster and a hen, or a chase between the sexes in which the woman tries to avoid the advances of the man, typically either a thrust of the pelvis or an elbow jab. The *rumba* was originally considered to be part of the poorer segment of Afro-Cuban society and thus marginalized by white society. As it grew in popularity in the 40s and 50s, more Afro-Cuban performers were gaining fame, visibility and respect in this genre. It also reflects a time in which Afro-Cuban music was embraced by the mainstream that previously performed *son* music, but began incorporating the sounds of *rumba* with distinct African percussion sounds.

One of *rumba*'s greatest practitioners was Celeste Mendoza. A contemporary of Celia Cruz and Omara Portuondo, Mendoza never achieved the international fame of Cruz and Omara, likely because she never left Cuba

¹⁸ Sublette, N. (2004). *Cuba and its music: From the firstdrums to the mambo*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Press Review.

after the Revolution. Unlike Cruz, who immigrated to New York and achieved international fame as the Queen of Salsa, Mendoza became known as the *La Reina de Guagancó*. She had a unique ability to take various Latin American styles and refashion them as guaguancó or rumba. Guaguancó was typically performed by a couple, but Mendoza was so effective at using her body language that she usually performed it solo,¹⁹ communicating directly with the audience using facial expressions and body language. This reclaiming of African roots can subsequently be seen in performances of artists such as Celia Cruz, Hector Lavoe and Gloria Estefan who often reference the term guaguancó in their songs. In the 1968 documentary “Celeste Mendoza,” she sings in a *solar*, a home place and plot of ancestral land, rather than in a nightclub, which according to Delia Poey “brings the rumba back to its beginnings—the streets and tenements of marginalized neighborhoods.”²⁰

As son became more and more popular after the touring of the Buena Vista Social Club, rumba flourished with new groups such as *Afro-Cuba de Matanzas* and *Los Muñequitos de Matanzas*. Originally named *Guagancó Mattancero*, their music recalls the roots of their ancestors, even at times dedicating songs to some of the traditional deities of *orishas*. Their members are considered to be descendants from the early days of the *cabildos*.

Perhaps one of the most phenomenal forms of Cuban music today is *timba salsa*, which is salsa unique to Cuba. Unlike the salsa music that most Americans are familiar with, *timba* is uniquely Cuban.



Photo Courtesy of David LeFevor

It is a hybrid from the New York Latin scene of the 1960s with roots from jazz, son and rumba. It became a phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s with the band sound of *Los Van Van*. The band’s founder, Juan Formell, molds funk and rock with *songo*, alternating violin and trombone exchanges coined by the band’s conga player. “Los Van Van remains the premier dance group on the island. Their albums are hugely popular and their songs, full of wry observation and street slang, capture the mood of the audience in any decade.”²¹

In Cuba it would not take long to feel the spirit of musical richness and African roots. It emanates from the small trios following tourists everywhere in the streets of Old Havana, the artists performing familiar songs from the Buena Vista Social Club, the dance performers on stilts in brightly colored African-inspired costumes, the tourists with their dazzlingly adept moves, and the small venues on every corner with salsa dancing. Cuba’s musical culture and heritage cannot be separated from its African roots. And there are few places on this planet that lend themselves more readily to a musical backdrop, and Cuba is certainly one of them.

¹⁹ [elmarakazo]. (2010). *Nostalgia Cubana - Celeste Mendoza - La Reina del Guaguancó*. [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfFeapjyLKQ>

²⁰ Poey, D. (2014). *Cuban women and salsa: To the beat of their own drum* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan US.

²¹ Dar, A. (2011). *Insight Guide Cuba* (5th ed.). Lavergne, TN: Ingram Content Group.

Classroom Application Lesson 3

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will explore Afro-Cuban music styles and groups to understand the influences that culture can have on music.

TARGET AUDIENCE: High School (11th and 12th Grade)

World History | Spanish | Music | World Geography | Social Studies | Cultural Studies

NATIONAL STANDARDS

Spanish

- Cultures: Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.
- Connections: Reinforce and further knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.
- Connections: Acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures.

Geography

- Places and Regions: The physical and human characteristics of places.
- Places and Regions: How culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions.
- Human Systems: The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics.

History/Social Studies

- Craft and Structure: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

Writing

- Production and Distribution: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will demonstrate knowledge of ancestral lands can serve as a catalyst for modern cultural iterations of music which retain its roots.
- Students will become aware of diverse cultures and traditions.
- Students will understand music in relation to history and culture.
- Students will compose and arrange music to explore and reflect on their own heritage.

TIME Two 90 minute class sessions.

MATERIALS

- Computer, projector, internet connection
- *They Are We* Documentary
- Video "Guaguancó: Los Muñequitos de Matanzas"
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPqWwldJH10>
- Video of Los Van Van singing "Temba Tumba y Timba"
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88slEnn2MnU>
- Video of Los Van Van and the Key2Cuba dancers, "Me Mantengo"
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOYAjVZ6T4s>
- Video of News on January 9, 2016 on WSM TV. Special report by Terry Bulger on "Bulger's Beat" on the Sozo Project about a group of 17 Ugandan youths performing here in the U.S. at the behest of church leader Jon Brennan of Owensboro, Kentucky.
- www.wsmv.com/clip/12126894/sozo-project-brings-young-ugandan-singers-to-nashville?autostart=true
- Copies of the article *Orbert Davis: Bringing Cuba and the U.S. Together through Jazz* (Appendix F)
- Student journal or a place to record observations.

VOCABULARY

- son
- bolero
- cha cha cha
- mambo
- rumba
- salsa
- timba salsa
- solar
- onomatopoeia

PROCEDURE

Note: This can be done before or after viewing the documentary *They Are We*.

Getting Started:

1. Engage students regarding their thoughts on Cuban music:
 - a. Which particular artists come to mind when you think of Cuban music?
 - b. What style of music do you consider to be uniquely Cuban?
 - c. What are your ideas of which cultural antecedents are brought together in today's Cuban music?
 - d. Do you feel that here in the U.S. have been influenced by Cuban music? If so, in what way?
 - e. Do you feel that there have been influences from the U.S. on Cuban music?
2. Have students look up the definitions of the following terms:
Son | bolero | cha cha cha | mambo | rumba | salsa | timba salsa
3. Using collaborative learning strategies, have students discuss which musical forms they feel are more associated with Caucasian cultures and with African cultures. Have students brainstorm artists that may be most closely associated with one musical form or another (for example, salsa: Celia Cruz, Gloria Estefan).

Main Activity:

1. Share a clip featuring a dance from the film, *They Are We*. In a small or whole group, facilitate a discussion among students about the film and the different music styles featured. What did you notice about the music? What instruments were used? What did you notice about the dancing? Record observations in student journals.
2. Then, share a clip of this performance of the group [Los Muñequitos de Matanzas](#).
 - a. Discuss the role of the percussionists in this video. Ask students draw comparisons between the role of the percussionists in both the documentary and the performance by Los Muñequitos. Record observations in student journal.
 - b. What are the similarities and differences in the body movements of the performers? Compare and contrast.
 - c. What do you observe about the "call and response" method of singing?
3. Show the video of a performance of Los Van Van singing ["Temba Tumba y Timba."](#)
 - a. Ask students identify musical styles that they can recognize from either the Africa, Cuba or the United States. Have students share observations and the musical styles identified.
 - b. Point out to students that band members draw some interesting parallels between life in Miami and life in Cuba. The lead singer of Los Van Van, Mayito (with the dreadlocks), uses the word *solar* during a segment of the song. How might he be using the word to point out differences between Cuba and the U.S., or Miami and Havana?
 - c. How effective is the use of onomatopoeia in this performance?
4. Transition to a different performance by the same band, Los Van Van and the Key2Cuba dancers, ["Me Mantengo."](#) In whole or small groups, brainstorm ways in which the performance brings together cultures and promotes communication and understanding through dance. Record observations in student journal.

Closing:

1. Point out how the uses of the words Temba, Tumba and Timba work to convey a sense of Cuban culture. Using these performances as a backdrop, have students work in small groups or pairs write a short lyric or poem which reflects their heritage. Students may use the tune of an existing song and change the lyrics if necessary. Students may perform the poem or song for the class.

EVALUATION

1. Students will be evaluated on:
 - a. Poem reflecting their heritage.
 - b. Student reflection about how music has brought them closer to another culture. Use reflective writing rubric (Appendix E) to assess student writing.
2. Students may be evaluated on:
 - a. Creation of class posters about discussion questions.
 - b. Extension Activities.
 - c. Home Connection Activity.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Some teachers might take this opportunity to teach some salsa dance moves.
2. Students read the article, *Orbert Davis: Bringing Cuba and the U.S. Together through Jazz* (Appendix F). In conjunction with this article, have students view a special news report by Terry Bulger on ["Bulger's Beat" on the Sozo Project](#). Students may write a piece summarizing or reflecting on the article and the news report.

HOME CONNECTION

1. Ask students brainstorm the benefits of such endeavors, focusing on cultural connections as opposed to political factions and differences. Ask students to share in writing how music has brought them into closer friendship with a person of another culture or given a better understanding of another culture.

- 5. Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

Glossary

Acculturation - The modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture.

Afro Latino - A Latin American person of African descent.

Afro-Cuba de Matanzas - A folkloric group in Cuba that is influenced by African traditions.

Antonio Maceo - (1845-1896) A Cuban General whose father was from Venezuela and mother was black. He joined the military with his father and brothers to fight for independence from Spain. Along with his brother José Maceo, Antonio protested the abolition of slavery, as it was not a part of the Treaty of *Zanjón*. Both brothers died in 1896 during Cuba's second War of Independence.

Asiento system - Permission from the Spanish government bring Africans to the Americas to work as slaves. Under this system, each time a slave was brought to the Americas a tax would be paid to Spain.

Assimilation, Assimilate - Action or process of a person or group becoming part of and adopting the ways of a different society, country, etc.

Bahia - One of Brazil's 26 states, located on the Eastern side of the country. About a third of Brazil's enslaved Africans were trafficked through the port of Bahia. Today, Bahia continues to be a center of black life in Brazil.

Banta - A group of people that live in rural Sierra Leone, Africa.

Black Caribs - A population of mixed people between Africans and the native inhabitants of St. Vincent. The descendants of the Black Caribs in Central America are known as the Garifuna.

Bolero - A dance characterized by sharp turns, stamping of the feet and sudden pauses. This can be found in Spanish and Cuban cultures.

Bongo - [drum] An Afro-Cuban percussion instrument originating in Cuba.

Bozal (bozales) - A Slave (or slaves) recently brought to a colony from Africa.

Buena Vista Social Club - A members' social club in Havana, Cuba that held dances and musical activities. It became a popular location for musicians to meet and play. A film and an album were named after this club. Some music was popularized by the touring of the Buena Vista Social Club.

Cabildos - Secret brotherhoods established by slaves in Cuba. Members spoke their own languages, maintained customs, danced and made music.

Candomblé - A religion that originated in the 19th century in Bahia, Brazil.

Cape Verde - An island off the coast of Western Africa.

Celeste Mendoza - (1930-1998) Guaguancó rumba singer from Cuba who popularized the form of dance and music and was the first woman to be a vocalist for the genre.

Celia Cruz - (1925-2003) A Cuban singer of Latin music. Known as the "Queen of Salsa," "La Guarachera de Cuba," as well as "The Queen of Latin Music Cha cha cha" (a form of dance and music originating from Cuba that is said to be derived from mambo.)

Clave – A percussion instrument consisting of a pair of short, thick wood dowels.

Cultural Integration - (see Assimilation, Assimilate)

Dialect - A linguistic term referring to a specific form of a language that is used by a certain region or group.

Diaspora - Refers to a migration or dispersal of people. According to Assogba, “a diaspora can be defined as national migrant communities living in interaction among themselves and with their country of origin.”

District of Rímac - (See Malambo)

Folk Culture - The routine and habitual aspects or practices of everyday life among a group that confer commonality between group members.

Folklore - The traditional myths, arts, and stories of a group that speak to the morals and identity of group members.

Forced Migration - Movement by a person from their home that is coerced by a threat of violence or undue harm, and is possibly physical and/or mental.

Francisco Pizarro - (1475-1541) Spanish conquistador who arrived in present day Peru, South America and conquered the Inca empire beginning in 1532.

Gangá-Longobá - Community of people in Cuba that have practiced and maintained traditions handed down to them by their ancestors who were brought to Cuba as slaves. The fidelity of the group to these traditions is documented in the film *They Are We*.

Garífuna - Descendants of the Black Caribs (see *Black Caribs*).

Genoese – A person from Genoa, Italy.

Guagancó - Considered to be the rumba of the streets, which is performed as a metaphorical mating between a rooster and a hen, or a chase between the sexes in which the woman tries to avoid the advances of the man, typically either a thrust of the pelvis or an elbow jab.

Guagancó Matancero - (see *Los Muñequitos de Matanzas*) The initial group name for a rumba super-group from Matanzas, Cuba. They began in 1952.

Haciendas - Ranches in early Spanish colonies.

Hollander – A person from Holland.

Immigrate - The movement of a population into a new area.

Infer - The ability to draw a conclusion from premises given or not.

Isthmus of Panama – A narrow strip of land with sea on either side, forming a link between North and South America.

José Maceo - (1849-1896) (See *Antonio Maceo*).

Juan Formell - (see *Los Van Van*).

La Reina de Guagancó - Album by Celeste Mendoza released 2000 (see CelesteMendoza).

Los Muñequitos de Matanzas (The Little Dolls of Matanzas) - The fan and comic-based name taken on by the music group *Guagancó Matancero* after a rise in popularity in 1953. Though personnel change out, the group still performs today.

Los Van Van – One of the most recognized bands in contemporary Cuban music. The group was founded and led by bassist Juan Formell for many years until his death in 2014. Formell molded funk and rock with *songo*. Former band member Changuito and Pupy are also some of the most important figures in contemporary Cuban music.

Mandinka – A West African Ethnic group of people.

Malambo - Enslaved Africans were trafficked through the main marketplace in Malambo, Peru. Today, Malambo is known as the District of Rímac and is a central Black neighborhood.

Mambises – Guerilla Cuban independence soldiers who fought against Spain in the Ten Years' War and the Cuban War of Independence.

Maniela – (See *quilombo*)

Manuel de Céspedes – Cuban planter who freed his slaves and made the declaration of Cuban Independence in 1868 which started the Ten Years' War.

Material Culture - A physical artifact or object traceable to a particular time and place in the world, i.e. archaeological antiquities.

Mutual Intelligibility - A relationship between languages or dialects in which the speakers can understand one another without intentional study or special effort.

Non-Material Culture - A non-physical object traceable to a particular time and place in the world, i.e. an idea.

Omara Portuondo – (1930-present) The sole female performer of the Buena Vista Social Club.

Onomatopoeia - A word or sign that when vocalized forms a sound which is like that to which it refers.

Orisha – A spirit in African-based syncretic religions such as Santería and Candomblé.

Palenque – (see *quilombo*)

Pancho Fierro – An Afro-Peruvian painter whose artwork captured much of the daily lives of city slaves.

Período Especial – A time of economic hardship in Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

Quilombo, cimmaron villages, manielas, or palenques – Communities in Latin America formed by Afro-Latinos. In these communities, Afro-Latinos were able to preserve and maintain their own cultural traditions and identities.

Ramón Castilla - With slavery's grip steadily weakening by each act of insurrection on the part of the enslaved, in 1854, President Ramón Castilla officially abolished slavery in Peru.

Rumba - Style of music originating in Matanzas and Havana, Cuba among Afro-Cuban communities that developed into multiple other styles of dance and music. The content of the music is highly folkloric in its meaning.

Salsa - Style of music originating between collaborations in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and New York that eventually spawned the dance of the same name. Salsa was popularized greatly in the 1970s.

Santería - A religion that synthesizes various aspects of Catholicism and African tribal religions. It survived hundreds of years of colonial repression and still thrives on the island today.

São Tomé – An island nation off the coast of Central Africa.

Senegambian – A person from the countries Senegal and the Gambia in Africa.

Solar - A home place and plot of ancestral land.

Son - A style of music and dance that originated in Cuba and gained worldwide popularity during the 1930s. Son combines the structure and feel of the Spanish *canción* (song) with Afro-Cuban traits and percussion.

Songo – A genre of popular Cuban music, created by Los Van Van. It is a music style that incorporates folkloric rumba into popular dance music.

St. Vincent – An island in the Caribbean Sea, located between Saint Lucia and Grenada.

Timba - A form of the salsa dance unique to Cuba.

Transatlantic Slave Trade - The largest deportation of Africans to the Americas to be sold as slaves. This occurred from the 15th to the 19th centuries.

Treaty of Zanjón – See *Antonio Maceo*.

Tres – A call and response sort of singing typical in son music.

Umbanda - A religion that originated in the 19th century in Bahia, Brazil.

Wolof – An ethnic group of people from Senegal, the Gambia and Mauritania.

Xangô – The *orisha* of Justice.

Yambú – One of the most popular varieties of the rumba dance.

Yellow Caribs - The native inhabitants of St. Vincent in the 17th Century.

About this Guide

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This guide was prepared for educators by educators.



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About Vanderbilt CLAS

The Center for Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt University is designated a Comprehensive National Resource Center on Latin America by the United States Department of Education. While maintaining one of the strongest concentrations of Brazilianist of any university in the United States, the Center's renowned faculty also has particular strengths in Mesoamerican anthropology and archaeology, the study of democracy building and economic development, Latin American literature and languages, and African populations in Latin America and the Caribbean. CLAS actively seeks to expand curricula on the subject of Latin America in K-12 settings by offering teacher workshops and institutes and designing teacher resource materials.

For more information on CLAS and available teacher resources, visit our website:

<https://as.vanderbilt.edu/clas/>



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