

## **Cuban Popular Music: Five Musical Genres**

I am not an ethnomusicologist but I have heard ethnomusicologists speak in Cuba and have read their works. The framework below is one based on research and scholarship of an esteemed musicologist in Havana, Dr. Olavo Alen Rodriguez. If you want to know more about his work look for the CD and booklet, From Afro Cuban Music to Salsa.

Based on rhythmic and stylistic elements, instrumentation and the groups of people playing the music, Dr. Alen separated Cuban popular music into 5 categories.

Danzón – includes danzón, mambo and cha-cha-cha

Son – includes son, guaracha, guajira-son, changüí

Rumba – includes guaguancó, yambú, and Columbia

Cancion – includes bolero and cancion

Punto guajiro – country music including punto libre and punto fijo

### **Danzon**

Danzon is perhaps the most European sounding of the Cuban popular music forms. It was derived from contradanse that was brought to Cuba via the French and Haitian immigrations that occurred with slave unrest in Haiti. The contradanse evolved into the danzón in Cuba with the first documented danzón, Las Alturas de Simpson, performed and published in 1879. Danzon was very popular into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and was proclaimed the Cuban national dance.

The mambo and cha-cha-cha developed as livelier sections within danzón, accommodating new dance steps developed by dancers. The danzón is a wonderful example of musicians and dancers working together to develop new material. Mambo and cha-cha-cha went on to become stand-alone forms (not imbedded in a danzón).

### **Rumba**

There are three styles of Cuban rumba: Guaguancó, Yambú, and Columbia. These styles feature percussion (many conga drums and boxes as well as clave and a log like instrument called the guagua), voices (a lead singer and a chorus of singers), and dancers. Rumba developed in the cities of Cuba, notably Havana and Matanzas where the freed slaves would gather in open courtyards called solars to find release from their hard work. A rumba also refers to the event where this music was enjoyed – it roughly means “party”. Rumba music and dance is not religious based, but a rumba “party” often also includes dancing of the orisha dances of the Santeria religion. Rumba is very African in feel, but the lyrics are in Spanish.

### **Guaguancó**

Guaguancó is an uptempo rumba style in which two dancers engage in flirtatious play. The woman teases and entices and the man tries to sneak in a “vacuna”- a movement of the hand, knee, head toward the woman’s pelvis. It involves beautiful sensual movements by the woman and a display of the man’s technical prowess with fancy footwork and body work. The intensity of the drums often increases as the dancers get more intense and vice versa. The clave in guaguancó differs from the son clave in the rhythmic placement of one of the 5 hits of clave. Rumba clave is derived from the African 6/8 bell pattern.

### **Yambú**

This rumba style has a slower tempo and is traditionally danced by older people (or young people imitating old people’s movements). There is more play-acting in yambú, but the sexual interplay and energy seen in guaguancó does not appear as part of this style.

Yambú can use either son or rumba clave.

### **Columbia**

Columbia has a very fast tempo and is a showcase for a single male dancer (although women do dance Columbia in Cuba these days). There is interplay between a lead drummer and the dancer with the two playing off and driving each other to greater feats.

### ***Rumba vs Rhumba***

Cuban rumba is not to be confused with the ballroom dancing style rhumba that was introduced and became popular in the US in the 1930s and 40s. Rhumba is in fact Cuban son which got renamed when it was introduced as a ballroom style (and this leads to much confusion). There is also Spanish rumba, which is a flamenco style.