

SOUNDING OUT...

HAVANA

There's no shortage of places to experience *son*, *rumba* and *bolero* in the Caribbean's largest city. Jan Fairley takes a look at its abundance of venues



'Oh, who does not dance in Havana?' sing Cuban rap group, the Orishas, 'It's my music... my roots, *rumba*, *son y guanguanco*'. And Havana today, famous for its vibrant nightlife since the decadent mafia days of 40s, is full of fabulous music, and all of it Cuban. The most widely heard is *son* – the granddaddy of salsa, with a sung verse, call and response vocals played on *tres* guitar, bass, and bags of Cuban percussion, notably *claves*, *guiro*, *maracas*, *bongos* and/or *conga* drums.

Walk along Calle Obispo, the pedestrianised street which runs from the Parque Central to the heart of Old Havana and you'll hear live music coming from the doors of practically every bar, including the

Café de Paris (corner of San Ignacio), bars in the Plaza de la Catedral, as well as numerous restaurants such as **La Mina**, and the **Taberna** on the corner of the Plaza Vieja. You may well hear the same songs played over and over again, from Compay Segundo's 'Chan Chan' to 'Dos Gardenias' made famous by Ibrahim Ferrer and Omara Portuondo, as well as classics like 'Lagrimas Negras'. (Thankfully there's a lot less 'Guantanamera' these days.) Since the mid-90s, when Cuba embraced tourism as an essential 'new' industry to bring much needed hard currency into the country, musicians have started appearing everywhere (even at the airport). Many play an 'official' repertoire, allegedly approved by the Ministry of Culture. The accent is almost exclusively on mellow

classics that conjure up a rose-tinted heritage, redolent of the image projected abroad by veterans like the Buena Vista Social Club.

However irresistible these evergreens are, they're nothing like the energetic dance songs heard in Havana nightclubs which appeal to today's Habaneros and their lifestyle, particularly the compelling *timba* dance music of the 90s which inspires the most outrageous dancing. And the raw rhythms of *rumba*, played on *boxes* and three *conga* drums, is also flourishing publicly. You can find old-style *trova*, the Spanish-derived ballad style sung by troubadours which fed into *son* (viz Compay Segundo and the Vieja Trova Santiaguera) as well as new troubadours reworking the style. And of course there's

OPPOSITE: *Tenements in central Havana* (Paul Morrison)
 RIGHT: *A singer in a Havana club* (Paul Morrison)
 BELOW: *A dancer from the Tropicana club* (Andy Carvin)

jazz. Afro-Cuban jazz has fed the Latin scene and many of Cuba's top popular musicians can play in a classical orchestra as easily as with a top-notch jazz outfit, such is their versatility. For this reason, Cuban jazz continues to maintain a cutting edge.

There are many reasons why Havana has such an exhilarating scene. Firstly, Cubans love music and secondly, music is now a key part of the economy, which means bands play live at home when not touring abroad. Cuban musicians tend to be incredibly well-educated in terms of both classical and popular music, and are undoubtedly some of the most talented you will find anywhere in the world. Cuban bands worth their salt continually create new music and are enormously, if amiably and wittily, competitive. Their desire to remain at the height of popularity means they love to interact with their home public so as to maintain direct contact with street taste: if not setting it, then picking up on it.

LISTINGS

➤ Check the *Cartelera*, the weekly freebie found at hotel information desks



(particularly at the Nacional and the Habana Libre). Lyng Chang's daily radio show *El Exitazo* (3-6pm on Radio Taíno, 1290 MW/93.2-93.4 FM) has music news and interviews. Chang also provides a new weekly Havana music diary at www.tumimusic.com.

Many big hotels will have a high-profile Saturday night gig and, although a trifle expensive at maybe \$50 a shot, it'll be worth it if it's a top band and if you are only in Havana for a short time.

To really find out where it's happening, ask at one of the late-night gatherings on the Malecón promenade, opposite the all-night café by the Fiat garage.

VENUES

Wherever you are, at whatever kind of venue, watch out for *jinetera* culture, ie Cubans who befriend you, many genuinely, others as wannabe dance partners who will be attracted by the tourist dollars which

they need to survive.

➤ **Casa de la Música** (Calle 20y35, Miramar, Playa); and the **Café Cantante** (below Teatro Nacional, Paseo y 39, Plaza de la Revolución; 5-8pm, pesos 50-80, \$2-4; 11pm-3am, \$10-15) for the most scintillating bands including NG La Banda, Carlos Manuel y Su Clan and David Alvarez, with his fresh Caribbean sound, who play regularly at these leading uptown clubs, frequented mostly by dollar-rich tourists. Also check the new **Casa de la Música Habana** (Galiana y Neptuno).

➤ **Salon Rosada Beny Moré** (51 Avenue Marianao) also known as 'El Tropical' (not to be confused with the Tropicana night club) – named after one of Cuba's most important mid-20th century composers, singers and big-bandleaders – is always the hottest ticket, although it has a bit of a reputation and taxi drivers may look askance when you name it as your destination. Top Cuban bands try out new songs to get direct feedback from the dancers whose creative