

Musica Cubana

By Robbie Gringras

Look, they can call it Mambo or Salsa or Cha-cha-cha, but as far as I'm concerned, they're all just names to explain it to Americans. To me it's all got one name: Cuban music. That was the idea for the club. A private members-only club simply called Musica Cubana. A place where old Cubans could gather once a week to listen to our old music, drink Cuban drinks, eat Cuban food, and talk Cuban Spanish without having to "translate" it to anyone else.

We didn't advertize all that much - we just went boca a boca - word of mouth - and within six months we were filling the club every Thursday night. After a year or two we were able to buy our own place, all paid for by members' dues.

I can't tell you how much I used to look forward to my evenings at Musica Cubana. It wasn't just the music or the food. It was that feeling of home. Old friends, old guys who looked like they were old friends, and the chatter. Loud chatter in Cuban Spanish. Yes, that's right, not your mainland Spanish, but our Spanish. With our accents, and our soft 's'. Slang, curses, laughter, jokes - all Cuban.

I don't know about you, but my English is not so great. I can write fine, but when I have to speak it I clam up. Even Luis, who teaches English literature at a college somewhere, even he has a heavy English accent and still expresses himself better in Cuban. The moment you opened the door to Musica Cubana your guard would come down, and the Cuban hidden inside just bubbled over. It's such a beautiful feeling.

And there was the small stuff, that you don't talk about but you can just feel in your bones. Like the rice and beans that Ernesto serves. Tastes dreadful. But I don't care because Ernesto calls it by its Cuban name: Moros y Cristianos. Not only that, but he says it with a wink, so that you know he understands that the name refers to the ancient Spanish rivalry between the Moors of North Africa, and the European Christians, and how their different colored skins mirror the contrast between white rice and black beans. Eating Ernesto's Moros y Cristianos is a stomach-churning affair - Lord knows how he ended up being a cook! - but it still feels like a deep mouthful of home.

Musica Cubana was my second home. My heart's home, if you want the truth. I love my wife and my kids, but hanging at Musica Cubana was like being weightless. No effort to speak in English (Maria insists we speak English with the kids and I get it), no need to explain anything, no need for anything to be explained to me. Until the Guests arrived.

It started with only one or two. A few of the younger guys started turning up with their girlfriends. American girlfriends. Not Cuban. That's okay, I'm happy for them. Maria is



from Mexico, and we've been married for over thirty years. But I don't bring her to the club. The club is for Cubans.

Not only that, these Guests, they don't speak Spanish. That's okay, too. But now, if you're sitting at a table with these women, all of a sudden it's rude to speak in Spanish. They wouldn't be able to understand. At Musica Cubana suddenly I have to speak in English.

Soon enough the number of guests starts to rise. More and more gringos and gringas, needing translations. Got to be inclusive, man, they tell me. They tell me we got to change the signs on the bathrooms because now not everyone understands the Spanish. It's crazy. It's getting like I don't recognize the place any more.

Now they want to let these Guests become members – say that it's not fair they come every week but have to pay guest prices every time. They want to pay membership dues like everyone else. I'm okay with that. I don't want to exploit anybody. You come here regularly, you should get equal rights.

Only thing is, once you're a member, you get to vote in the AGM [Annual General Meeting]. You get to have a say about what music we play, what food we eat, what language we speak in the club.

So what happens when they become the majority? What happens when they want to play American rap instead of Compay Segundo and Níco Saquito? I'll go crazy!

I say there has to be a limit. That if Musica Cubana is to remain the club it was always meant to be – a refuge for the weary Cuban soul – there has to be a limit.

They want to be members? Fine.

Want to vote in the AGM and influence what goes on here? Fine. Make them full members.

But I just say we should put a limit on the numbers. I say the membership of Musica Cubana should always be at least 80% Cuban.

They want a different kind of club – let them set it up for themselves.

Do you understand me?

