

CONGA DE COMPARSA

Conga de Comparsa is the name given to the rhythm/dance of the Cuban Carnival, the annual street festival celebrated all over Cuba. It has a cast of hundreds that includes costumed dancers, flag bearers, farolas (large poles decorated with colorful ornaments and colored lights), singers, and a battery of percussion. The celebration can be compared to Carnival in Brazil (with its samba schools) and Mardi Gras in New Orleans - loud, frantic and boisterous, just like its colorful history.

The origins of Cuban Carnival started during the early Spanish colonization of Cuba, when cabildos (groups that were organized to maintain their particular cultural heritage) would be allowed to play their music, dance and sing freely, celebrating all their various musical cultures (Yoruba, Bantú/Congolese, Dahomey, Carabali) . This festival coincided with the Christian holiday known as the Day Of the Children (Dia de los Niños) which is celebrated January 6th.

The Cuban Carnival/Comparsa tradition was introduced in Havana in the early 19th century, when slaves marched to the Capitans General Palace to perform for the various government dignitaries present. Eventually these parades became highly competitive events with a panel of judges (which included a dancer, percussionist, and a visual artist) who awarded trophies to the most original, colorful, and exciting comparsa. After slavery's end, Carnival continued but was eventually moved to February to coincide with the beginning of Lent, a tradition that still continues all over Havana.

The music of Conga/Comparsa is a hybrid of many styles from various African musical cultures. Out of these musics emerged two distinct styles : the Conga Oriental (from the eastern part of Cuba) and the Conga Habanera (from Havana).

CONGA HABANERA

The Conga Habanera was the original Comparsa and used many of the instruments found in Rumba. It consisted of tumbadoras (low, medium and high), bombos (small bass drums), the quinto (solo drum, which improvises), sartenes (a set of frying pans inverted and fastened to a wooden box which was strapped around the neck and played with metal beaters), cowbells, and shakers (marugas).

The distinctive difference between the two styles was the use of the snare drum (redoblante) in the Havana Comparsa, which was a military influence and gave the ensemble a marching quality. In addition to the large percussion battery, a solo voice and choir would sing specifically composed songs in Spanish or popular songs adapted to Carnival. As Comparsa grew in size and volume, singers gave way to brass ensembles (in Havana) eventually returning to vocal soloists with amplification. Starting in the 1950s trucks and tractors were used to pull the carrosas (floats) and carry amplified acoustic instruments (piano, saxes and drum sets) down the parade route. Comparsa takes control of Cuba during Carnival, with thousands of people following the various groups in a festival like atmosphere, singing and dancing to the rhythm of the Conga.