

ORQUESTA ANACAONA

# The strength of a sound that combines tradition and contemporaneity

Cuba's first all-female band turns 85

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• **CONCEPCIÓN** Castro and her sisters knew what they were doing when, in 1932, they decided to form the first all-female sextet in Cuba, which they named Anacaona.

They were going to challenge the male-dominated Cuban son scene and chose as their emblem the legendary queen of the Taíno people, who in addition to dancing and composing verses for their *areítos*, or religious festivals, resisted the Spanish conquerors in the 16th century, who renamed her island of Quis-queya, meaning "mother of the earth," as La Española (or Hispaniola – today Haiti and the Dominican Republic).

The founders of the group were six of the eleven Castro Zaldarriaga sisters, but later, when they switched to the jazz band format, and then to the typical charanga ensemble, the remaining sisters joined. Concepción (saxophone) would be the director.

The radio offered them a certain inroad, but their greatest success came during the Havana "Aires Libres" (open-air evening concerts), under the colonnades of the Hotel Saratoga, on the Paseo del Prado, where they became a real hit.

The Saratoga became well-known due to the presence of the first all-female band. There the group demonstrated the strength of their sound. Incidentally, the hotel located in central Havana, opposite the iconic Capitolio, hopes to regain its former glory, and in recent years has received celebrity guests, such as pop star Madonna, who last year celebrated her 58th birthday in Havana, and Beyoncé in 2013.

Returning to Anacaona, in the 1930s and 40s, these talented women visited Mexico, where they participated in films such as *La noche es nuestra, No niego mi pasado*, and *Mujeres de teatro*, played concerts in New York and Paris, and achieved international fame.

Looking back into the history of this group, one can not forget singers who later made Cuban music history as part of the ensemble: Omara Portuondo, in the 1940s, preceded by Paulina Alvarez, and Estela Pérez Grillo, the sister of Machito, the singer, trumpet player, and musical director of several famous bands such as the Afro-Cubans, alongside Mario Bauzá in 1940.

In a very central area of Havana's Vedado neighborhood, we coincidentally bumped into another member of the famous band, Teté Caturla, the youngest daughter of the great Cuban composer Alejandro García Caturla, who, on speaking about Anacaona, recalled: "My sisters and I were part of Anacaona, a shining light of Cuba." Teté, like Omara before her, was a member of

another legendary Cuban music group, the Cuarteto D'Aida.

## TRADITION AND CONTINUITY

In 1983, the sisters Georgia and Dora Aguirre, bassist and saxophonist, respectively, two musicians with solid professional training, who had graduated from the Amadeo Roldán Conservatory, joined Anacaona, under the orchestra's second director, Alicia Castro, and four years later, when the Castro Zaldarriaga sisters retired, Georgia received the baton.

The group has continued to exist throughout the years without rupture, conserving its style but attentive to changes, demonstrated through its - still limited - discography, among which there are some memorable records.

In 1991, under record label PM RECORDS, and with the musical production of maestro Juan Formell, the band recorded *Anacaona... ¡AY!*. The album includes emblematic compositions of popular Cuban dance music, some of which were included in the founders' repertoire, such as "Si me pudiera querer," by Ignacio Villa, or "Bola de Nieve," as he was known, and contemporary songs in some cases created especially for them, such as the track which provides the name of the album, composed by Formell himself.

With record label LUSAFRICA, in 2000 Anacaona presented *Lo que tu esperabas*, produced by Joaquín Betancourt. Once again, the album offered a magnificent selection of traditional and contemporary tracks, and even a version of the French classic, "Il fait trop beau pour travailler," by Claude Bolling, confirming the group's versatility.

The ensemble has released two interesting albums with BIS-MUSIC, one in 1995, produced by Pucho López, which bears the title of a beautiful bolero by Juanito Márquez, *Como un milagro*, and another in 2008, produced by Georgia Aguirre herself, alongside Reinaldo Aguirre, entitled *¡No lo puedo evitar!* which features the voices of Lourdes Torres and Omara Portuondo.

The Colibrí label recorded the band to celebrate its 80th anniversary, offering an anthological album that includes the song "Anacaona," by Puerto Rican Tite Curet, that tells the story of the Taíno queen who gives the ensemble its name.

In the Tablao of the Alicia Alonso Grand Theater of Havana, Georgia Guerra offered a press conference regarding some of the activities to be held in celebration of the orchestra's 85th anniversary.

She announced that a new album is currently being produced, as of yet without a title, by the BisMusic label, which will feature a compilation of some of the orchestra's most pop-



Anacaona offered a mini-recital in the Tablao of the Alicia Alonso Grand Theater of Havana, to announce activities to celebrate its 85th anniversary. Pictured playing the bass on the left is the band's Director, Georgia Aguirre.

ular songs throughout the years, as well as new tracks composed by Gustavo Cabañas, Osvaldo Montero, and Alberto Reina, among others.

To celebrate this anniversary, the band has prepared a tour of Havana neighborhoods, and will perform, for example, in the emblematic streets of Prado and Neptuno, in Parque Trillo in central Havana - where Georgia lived for many years, with her home used as their rehearsal space - and in the municipality Diez de Octubre, where the orchestra's founders lived.

The tour will be extended across all the major theaters in each province and will conclude with a concert to mark National Culture Day (October 20) in Havana's Mella Theater.

## AN EXCLUSIVE WITH GEORGIA

After announcing these projects and before offering a mini-recital to introduce new singers, Georgia agreed to answer some questions for our publication.

### Has the musical structure been maintained?

It has been renewed of course. I can tell you, for example, that when we started there were no women trumpet players and so we put as the leading voice of the brass section a flute, an alto sax and a tenor sax, which was played by my sister. Little by little, as women were encouraged, we advanced. I had women trumpeters who had not studied the trumpet, they were girls who played the French horn and became trumpet players to the rhythm of Anacaona. Today, fortunately, I have two trumpet players who are middle-level graduates, and are now students of the Higher Institute of Art, and of course you can see in their training that they have a solid base as instrumentalists and that is very good for the band. We have been changing with the times, at certain moments we have incorporated the keyboard, the tres (guitar-like three-course cho-



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Concepción Castro Zaldarriaga was the first director of Anacaona, which went from being a sextet to a jazz band, then to a typical charanga band formation, before becoming the orchestra that it is today.

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Georgia Aguirre alongside Omara Portuondo (right), a member of Anacaona in the 1940s, who continues to collaborate with the band on some of its albums. She will feature at the final concert to celebrate the ensemble's 85th anniversary.

rdophone of Cuban origin). We are taking a more modern approach, demonstrating that Anacaona covers all music, from the most traditional to the most contemporary. We are adapting. I'll give you another example: today fusion music has more electronic percussion and we are preparing ourselves for that, too.

### So your repertoire has been expanded?

We perform Cuban dance music, mainly with a traditional repertoire that we always play, of course, but look, in popular festivals the Cuban public requests more contemporary music. We have that traditional repertoire and it accompanies us throughout the world. When we perform outside of Cuba we obligatorily take it with us, although of course we include more modern music, songs written for us by different composers, and we are thus building a new repertoire, and that's what we are currently working to publicize, with boleros, and Latin jazz, again, because the audience today doesn't know that Anacaona always played this, thus we also pay tribute to our founders."

### What's the reaction abroad?

I can modestly tell you that it amazes us how well people receive us. Although we have not had the possibility of playing on the radio at an international level, for our music to be heard, always due to the problems of the U.S. blockade, which

doesn't allow us to reach these audiences through the radio or our records, audiences abroad are surprised to see a female band with such quality, that makes them dance. I think it is a privilege for Cuba to have a group of purely women that has existed for 85 years.

### More recently, what has been your most successful song?

In Cuba, "Llora si te duele" was a huge hit. It was a revolution within the music of Anacaona, a different genre, and people really accepted and enjoyed it. It was appreciated that the band moved with the times. This track has even had an international repercussion, it has been played in some nightclubs, the video has been seen, which is important for the world to hear about you. Reggaeton was fashionable, but we went for fusion music, that had a little of everything, with the essence of Cuban music, plus very well written lyrics. From that moment I began to work with Osvaldo Montero, the composer of this song.

Anacaona is part of Cuba's musical heritage. This female ensemble, the oldest and most prestigious of Cuba, maintains its unmistakable style: strong, catchy, with a solid instrumental base. With these characteristics, the band has managed to remain close to the hearts of those who love Cuban music. •