

## WITH A CUBAN SONG IN THE HEART

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In 1961, with his parents and sister, a sixteen-year-old Iván Acosta escaped the island of Cuba by boat. He had nothing with him except for two long-playing records, which he smuggled off the island tucked under his shirt. These two records were the first in a collection he would grow for the rest of his life in New York City, and which now numbers more than 5,000 LPs. The music in this collection informs and interacts with every moment in [With a Cuban Song in the Heart](https://www.un-gyvelimitedgroup.com/history-ephemera-industry-books/a-cuban-song-in-my-heart) (<https://www.un-gyvelimitedgroup.com/history-ephemera-industry-books/a-cuban-song-in-my-heart>), Iván Acosta's memoir, published by Un-Gyve Press in 2016.

La Onda Musical del Oyente was a radio station located on the famous corner of Infanta and Carlos III. The program included a segment entitled *Los tres pegaditos* ("Three in a row"). The first segment was a Tata Ramos bolero, followed by another beautiful piece by Esther Borja, and finally one by Maria Luisa Chorens. My friends Carlos, Miguelito, Fat Alberto, Chamaco, and I stopped in the doorway of the building to tell each other made-up movies. That afternoon was clear bright sunshine. Suddenly we saw the sky covered with leaflets. At first we thought they were small birds migrating from the north, but we soon realized they were proclamations of counterrevolutionary condemnations. A plane piloted by the former head of the Revolutionary Air Force, Commander Pedro Luis Díaz Lanz, was launching those leaflets. Díaz Lanz had broken with the revolution and been exiled to Central America. All the machine guns from Castillo del Príncipe, El Morro, and other rooftops started shooting at the plane. Within seconds the Havana sky was covered with anti-aircraft tracers. My friends and I ran back to our respective apartments. Many of those wildly fired projectiles hit targets in the streets and buildings of the city center. One struck a poor seller of meat and guava pastries while crossing the avenue Carlos III in front of the Cinema Manzanares. The corpse of the pastry maker was left in pieces, embedded in the posters announcing the new Elvis Presley movie, *Jailhouse Rock*. Soon after, the Maximum Leader presented himself on the scene. He still enjoyed tremendous popularity among the people. This was the fifth time that I saw the Commander-in-Chief. I could approach him; I even touched his shoulder and asked him about his Czech submachine gun. My friend Carlos, who had by now awakened from the revolutionary euphoria, was angry with me because I put my hand on the shoulder of the Maximum Leader. He even asked me to wash my hands before I talked to him again. I still didn't really understand what was happening. Then I read one of the proclamations that had fallen from the sky. I was especially struck by the message that said: "The silent revolution is coming, the revolution of lies, the revolution of hunger and of destruction." Ironically, around the corner at La Onda Musical del Oyente, the programming remained the same, with "Jailhouse Rock" performed in Spanish by Enrique Guzmán and the Teen Tops.

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Sleeping on the floor during the armed struggle was common in Santiago.



People covered the windows with mattresses because most nights there were gunfights between the revolutionaries and Batista's *casquitos*.



One night, while listening to Cuba's most popular radio comedy, *La Tremenda Corte* with Pototo and Filomeno, the program suddenly went

off the air. The revolutionaries had placed a bomb that, upon exploding, collapsed the enormous transmitter at the entrance of the city.

For several days, Santiago de Cuba was disconnected from the rest of the island. They declared a general strike that paralyzed the city. So, to entertain us, my papá put on the records of the troubadour Guillermo Portabales, 78 rpm records that were half scratched. Portabales was the creator of the *guajira de salón*. In the sixties, Portabales would die, run over by a car, in Old San Juan in Puerto Rico.

In the patio of my house there was a cage where I raised American chickens. There my hen Lala had grown up. As due to the strike there was not much to eat, at home it was decided to make an *arroz con pollo* with my Lala. Of course, I didn't try even a mouthful. From that day, rearing chickens under my supervision was finished. Now it was I who declared myself on strike. It took me many years to go back to eating chicken because whenever the occasion presented itself, I remembered my dear Lala.

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Several commanders appeared alongside the charismatic Camilo, who with his Camagüey cowboy hat and his Thompson machine gun captivated all the children who collected trading cards of the Revolution. By the middle of the year 1961 several of the heroes that I had collected in my album had already disappeared. In a short time, of the twenty-two most prominent commanders, the only ones left were the Commander-in-Chief, his brother—also a *jefe*—and another six of minor importance. The wall, prison, or exile had blotted out the others from the collection. My friend Chamaco and I, from the roof, tuned in to a clandestine radio station that broadcast from Mexico. Fernando Albuérne, king of the bolero, sang with much sentiment “El Son se fue de Cuba” (“The son left Cuba”). Looking toward the Castillo del Principe, where they kept the 2506 Brigade imprisoned, I picked up my collection of trading cards, and in a fit of rage with tears in my eyes, threw the album into the building's water tank. Ironically, the *postalita* of the Commander-in-Chief came floating to the surface.

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*The album artwork included here is courtesy of the author Iván Acosta, who wishes to express his acknowledgment and admiration to all the record labels, artists, illustrators, photographers, and art directors who have generously allowed these album covers to be exhibited. The author made all reasonable effort and attempt to identify designer names and record label directors or owners of copyright. "El Carretero" by Guillermo Portabales is featured courtesy of [Un-Gyve Records \(https://www.un-gyvelimitedgroup.com/cds-dvds-vinyl-lps-eps-45s/copy-of-with-a-cuban-song-in-the-heart\)](https://www.un-gyvelimitedgroup.com/cds-dvds-vinyl-lps-eps-45s/copy-of-with-a-cuban-song-in-the-heart).*