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# Cuban Women in Popular Culture

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# Cuban Women in Popular Culture

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Popular culture is, by and large, a disruptive influence on the Cuban goal of equality for women. This rather strong statement is based on a short visit to Cuba, but fairly extensive data sources. These include daily bombardment by muzak, two evenings at night-clubs, five Cuban long-playing record albums, three women's magazines and a popular music booklet, visits to the Bay of Pigs Exhibition, and the viewing of national-sponsored television. In other words, during even a brief stay, the visitor is in frequent contact with Cuban popular culture.

There are two origins of Cuban popular culture: foreign and indigenous. The two major streams of foreign influence on Cuban music are from Latin America and the United States/Western Europe. The Latin effect is characterized by the love ideology. Romantic myths are maintained through images of traditional love and sex roles. The style of presentation is, moreover, melodramatic—lovers “pine” for each other, they are “madly” in love, and love is a focus of life. The Western effect shares similar themes, especial-  
**(see page 18)**

## Cuban Women (from page 3)

ly of love and romance. But there also is an underlying alienation and cynicism, an element of emotional control and distance, absent in the Latin material.<sup>1</sup>

A major indigenous cultural medium was Muzak, played in our hotel and in a museum we visited. Radio stations also aired something similar as a consequence of a government effort to supply instrumental versions of popular songs without accompanying lyrics. Stylistically, this resulted in a homogenization of the music and an elimination of the lyrical themes noted above. Clearly, the populace had access to other radio and music resources. The "approved" popular music lacked the vitality of the songs heard in nightclubs and over less regimented stations.

Music at the Tropicanna nightclub was a mixture of prerevolutionary Cuban and Latin American music. This seemed to be a very popular show, reflecting the government's support of this program. Music presented at another nightclub, in the heart of Havana, was even more melodramatic and romantic than that at the Tropicanna. The songs were so well known and enjoyed by the audience that they frequently sang along, and a man sitting behind us was moved to tears as he listened. At both nightclubs, there was only heterosexual, partner dancing by the audience. The women wore "glamorous" clothing, especially the performers, featuring tight and slinky lines accentuated by very high-heeled shoes.

One of the strongest disrupting images of women in the Cuban media was "the blonde." An informal count of the hair color of Cuban women led to a "guestimate" that about one in twenty dye their hair blonde. This blonde woman image was featured in a Soviet women's magazine in their advertisements and fashion designs.

An image of the "ideal" black woman was embodied by Donna Summer.<sup>2</sup> Her picture was supposed to be "cut-out" of the popular music booklet. As a young, beautiful, slim woman, she reinforces many of the restrictive stereotypes of women. Dressed in a seductive disco outfit with long, straightened, bouffant hair, she becomes a consumer ideal difficult to realize in the everyday life of Cuban women.

Blondes are also visible in indigenous materials. Blondes were depicted in several important government posters. For example, the only military poster we saw that recruited women pictured a blonde female soldier. In one of the most frequently viewed posters, there was an Anglo-looking child with long blonde pony tails reading a book. This was intended to exhort children to "study daily."

The Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas (Women's Federation) did show more variety in their portrayals of women than other popular resources. In their popular magazine, they featured women leaders and workers in the market place. However, these magazines also included articles on cooking, cleaning, baby care and fashion. This was especially true of an issue bought on the street compared to the anniversary issue provided to us by the Women's Federation.

A particularly revealing manifestation of contemporary Cuban culture was a large national exhibition marking the twentieth anniversary of the US-inspired invasion of Cuba. This exhibit used a wide range of media techniques: paper mache monsters of the US military, slides, music, artifacts, colored strobe lights and television. The viewer was deluged by sensory input concerning the unjust attack on, and victorious rout by, the Cuban people. The key themes were preparedness, defense and violence. Loud noises, flashing lights, sinister music, military arms drove home the message of "good guys" versus "bad guys" in the Cuban struggle.<sup>3</sup> In the street outside the show, there was a video-drama about the killing of pre-revolutionary Cubans. These right-wing soldiers were machine-gunned and ambushed in slow motion, dying in vivid color and considerable detail on the screen. Throughout the exhibit, the emphasis was on male military leaders and soldiers. Women were presented primarily as victims and innocent bystanders.

Daily television in Cuba also celebrated the male values and ideals of the military and competitive sports. This bias is continued through the importation of foreign films made in patriarchal societies. For example, the

American movie *Hello Dolly* was shown on television one evening during our stay.

The popular culture of Cuba, one must conclude, does not consistently support changing roles of women. There are, of course, some strong and often effective new influences. The Women's Federation and popular movies such as *Theresa*<sup>4</sup> point out new image of women. But until the love ideology is seen as part of women's oppression (see Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*), popular music will keep alive the idea of suffering, pain and heartache as natural accompaniments to intimate relationships. Homosexuality will continue to be ostracized, and women will continue to try to be like the blonde, young, slim models they often see depicted in the media.

Stressing military values for women as well as men also does not foster positive sex-role change.<sup>5</sup> Cuban women, like us, need strong new images of human growth and appreciation. Cubans are committed to changing the roles of women and opening the economic and political structures to them. In many ways they are successful in promoting this. Their popular culture, however, is largely a force mitigating against their success.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Modern technology also is more likely to be praised than revolutionary ideals. The *Star Wars* theme, for example, was recognized by Cubans in our hotel, but reggae, the revolutionary Jamaican music, was not.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Summer is a "born again Christian" now, singing many gospel songs. It was the disco image that was portrayed in the booklets.

<sup>3</sup> This exhibit was the only place where military personnel abounded. Their presence appeared to be a reinforcement of the images and not a sign of military protection for the exhibit.

<sup>4</sup> This is a very popular film, in Cuba and internationally, depicting the Cuban women's struggle for equality in the home. The predominant image is that Cuban women are discriminated against in childcare and housekeeping, but that they are strong and battling to change this.

<sup>5</sup> A national Women's Federation leader expressed her ideas about military needs as a function of defense. This was a source of anguish but pride to her as a Cuban. This more positive image of the military for defense only, and with regret, was not the primary message of the war movies and military actions presented in many popular media. The latter images were "machos" and depicted a great deal of violence and aggression without a holistic context including the costs and long-term effects.