

VIRGILIO MARTÍ MASTER OF GUAGANCÓ

Elizabeth Hanley

Photographed by Wolfgang Wesener

He likes to play 'em soft, he says. Imagine Cary Grant, raised on Cuba's R-rated rumbas, as a lounge lizard. You've got Virgilio Martí, *guaguancó* master. Soft is the wrong word. Under Martí's hand, *guaguancó*, always haunting, becomes more and more lyrical—though his no-nonsense congas and patterns would have no idea even how to greet sentimentality. It's the blues in a garden of midnight bloomers. It's gorgeous. It's hypnotic. It can hurt.

Martí's been playing *guaguancó* for close to half a century. Always in Havana there were the backyard *rumbero* parties. No conga in sight; that's okay, get out the old wood cartons. Slide the African rhythms of the sugar cane cutters into waltz tempo, you've got *guaguancó*. Still in his teens, Martí worked his music into one of Fred Astaire's on-location tropical extravaganzas. Exotic dancers and cruise ships were in their prime. So were red ruffled sleeves (but really ruffled, sleeves themselves big as congas). Martí decided to take on the circuit. They loved him even in snotty Buenos Aires. In New York, it was Machito's band Martí called home. Things quieted a bit after those glory years, but by then he had recorded four albums letting everybody in on just how good *guaguancó* could be. Two are still available: *Saludando a Los Rumberos* (Caiman); *I Am Guaguancó* (Gema).

For Martí playing is playing. It doesn't matter all that much where—even, within Latin parameters, what. These days where, at least every Wednesday, is a pre-peppermint lounge where "Happy Birthday" gets requested a lot—La Detente, in Queens. The scene is right out of *Crossover Dreams*, as is Martí, who played Rubén Blades' mentor in the film—more or less himself. Martí likes Wednesdays at La Detente, even though the musicians behind him and Mauricio Smith, flutist and composer of most of the *Crossover* score, try real hard to drive all rhythmic complexity into the arms of tired salsa. When you do hear Martí and Smith over the efforts of the support team, even on some standard, it'll have a *guaguancó* twist, with that eerie push-pull breaking up the usual phrasing. Ask for a full-fledged hit of the real stuff and chances are the duo will oblige, happily. They have been friends since their Machito days; one easily elaborates on the other.

Occasionally there's a chance to see Martí as he deserves to be seen. At The Kitchen last April, Daniel Ponce sat at his congas answering those of Martí, while Orlando Rios Puntilla, the latest and perhaps the hottest of the recent Cuban arrivals, worked the claves. He also worked his pierce of a voice against the aged intimacy of Martí's. Only half the evening's lyrics were in Spanish, the rest *ñañigo* from Nigeria. The songs were traditional, or have become so by now. There were three maybe four gourds. Smith's flute added silver.

Crossover Dreams director Leon Ichaso once asked Martí what he thought of mainstream American music. Pretty much shit, was his answer. After an evening like this at The Kitchen, Martí's chauvinism seems remarkably reasonable. The Caribbean Culture Center has a similar show planned for October.

D

SUDDENLY, THIS SECTION

Anthony Haden-Guest



"Do you think I enjoy this endless fun, fun, fun?"



Virgilio Martí