

Iván Acosta, with a Cuban song in his heart

- [Mayra A. Martínez](#)
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A fan of Cuban music, writer, playwright and composer, Ivan Acosta speaks from Manhattan, where he has lived in exile for more than half a century. There, in the center of the world, he has never strayed from his Cuban roots. Ivan was born in one of the most picturesque and musical areas of Santiago de Cuba. —the legendary Barrio de Los Hoyos, famous for its comparsas, its carnival congas and a breeding ground for legendary musicians on the island such as Níco Saquito, Compay Segundo, Eliades Ochoa, Los Hermanos Rigual, Trío Matamoros and Desi Arnaz, among others.—. As a result, he has always been exposed to good music.

Author of multiple plays (*They are not all those who are*, *Things I found on the road or Cuba: Point X*), including the tragicomedy *The Super*, Iván has a long career in advertising media. He has also produced concerts and recordings of Latin music, with an emphasis on jazz, as well as directed feature-length fiction films, which have been successfully adapted for theater and film, and published in 2011 by the Alarcos publishing house, part of Cuba's National Council for the Performing Arts. He has also produced concerts and recordings of Latin music, with an emphasis on jazz, as well as directed the feature films *Friends* (1983), *y Rosa and the Scoundrel Executioner* (2008), and the documentaries *How a rumba is formed* (2003), *y Candide*, *"Hands of Fire"* (2005).

At the beginning of the interview, I ask him about his habits:

"I have always been very independent, both in the arts and in politics. I have liked to work in different artistic genres, and that is why I have produced music, theater, cinema, literature and I have even been a curator of plastic arts exhibitions; apart from working for many years as a professional in the world of advertising.

"I'm organized in my own way. I have about six thousand LPs, in an order that only I know. The same goes for my nearly two thousand books. But, when I produce or direct, I'm more disciplined, both in film and theater; in concerts or TV commercials. If there is no organization, the lion eats you. I learned discipline in the military. I am very patient, detail-oriented and persevering. However, I never had the dedication and discipline to learn to play the guitar well. And I would have loved to master a musical instrument.

How did the hobby of collecting begin? For what purposes do you collect?

"The first record I bought in my life was in Havana, one by the rockanrolero Luis Bravo, who before the Revolution was the musical idol of the Cuban youth, together with the Argentine Luis Aguilé. That album escaped from Cuba with me when we escaped by boat to Jamaica in 1961.

"Then, in New York, I liked to visit the nightclubs or record stores, and I would consume hours looking at them and reading their notes, but I didn't have the money to buy them. One day I heard *Afro Blue* I bought a Mongo Santamaría LP, and I left a dollar deposit with the seller. Then I returned with the money in full to the record store and bought it. That record stayed with me during the years I was in the 101st Parachute Division in the U.S. Army. So, every time I got a little money together, I would buy a record. I really liked Elvis Presley. While I was at Fort Campbell Army Base in Kentucky, I would go and listen to country music, including very folk music, like the *bluegrass country music*. I have several records of this musical genre in my collection.

"In the 1970s I was working as a social counselor at an agency in Harlem, and there I had several African-American colleagues who knew a lot about blues and jazz. I became familiar with the names and music of Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon, Dr. Billy Taylor, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Louis Armstrong and many others. From time to time I would go to a nightclub in the heart of Harlem, and buy some records of blues singers, or jazz musicians.

"During that same decade, Cuban was at its peak in New York. Puerto Rican groups and exiled Cuban musicians had formed several orchestras in the charanga format. —from which emerged some very popular ones such as La Charanga 76, La Nobel, La Broadway, Fajardo y sus Estrellas, La Charanga 76 and La Nobel.—while great Puerto Rican musicians such as Tito Puente, Tito Rodríguez, Eddy and Charlie Palmieri, Ray Barretto, Joe Quijano and Willie Colón distinguished themselves brilliantly performing Cuban rhythms such as pachanga, chachachá, guaguancó, guaracha, son montuno and the incomparable mambo. At the time, New York was about 20 years old. *ballrooms* where almost every night dozens of Latin orchestras played our music. Then they started calling everything salsa, and I was buying records. So I built up a small collection, which then grew through acquisitions at *flea markets* fairs and festivals".

In a program with Camilo Egaña, on CNN, you said that you could live with very few material things, but not without your record collection, especially your Cuban music collection...

"The anecdote is the following: once I was on a bus going to the advertising agency where I worked. It was pouring down a tremendous New York downpour. Suddenly, through the window, I saw in the street a huge pile of LPs tied with a rope, among the garbage. I got off at the next corner and ran to the rescue, under that deluge. There were a lot of them, about 200, but I managed to carry about 50. I walked through the rain to the agency, where they were waiting for me for a meeting. I walked in soaking wet with those bundles. Everyone in the room was amazed, looking at me. Then, it occurred to me to give a record to each one of them. And so, there was no scolding for being late.

"When the CD fever started, many people were throwing away their LPs and record stores were auctioning them off. I would feast on picking them out of the trash or buying them at special prices. In the heart of the Times Square subway station there was an LP store, which was there for about 50 years; every week I would go in and always came out with two or three records. I came to have almost ten thousand LPs.

"In my collection I have many Cuban records that, unfortunately, with the absurd censorship of the government on the Island, disappeared. In fact, today in Cuba most people born after the Revolution ignore the names of the main drivers of Cuban music before 1959. For example, you can ask many intelligent young people, music students in Cuba, who were Dámaso Pérez Prado, Marco Rizo, Chico O'Farrill, Cándido Camero, Francisco Aguabella, Mongo Santamaría, Blanca Rosa Gil, Olga Guillot, Celia Cruz, Vicentico Valdés, Rolando Laserie, Orlando Contreras, Fernando Albuerne, La India de Oriente, Marta Pérez, Olga and Tony, Los Hermanos Rigual, Juan Márquez, Los Violines de Pego, Xiomara Alfaro, Luisa María Güell, La Sonora Matancera, Miguelito Valdés, Osvaldo Farrés, Julio Gutiérrez, Roberto Ledesma, Mario Bauzá, Antonio Machín, Machito, Graciela, Eduardo Davidson, La Lupe and a hundred other names, and they would not know how to answer. All of them are part of my collection and they appear in my book *With a Cuban song in my heart*".

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Iván Acosta

Courtesy image

How did you study theater? How did the screenplay for *The Super*? With so much love for music, how did it not occur to you to make a musical?

"When I was studying film at N.Y.U. I had the opportunity to take theater courses and seminars. I always thought it was important to know about theater to be a good film director. My first play was an avant-garde musical, *Shout 71* for which I composed 16 rock songs, performed by a dynamic cast of young actors and actresses.

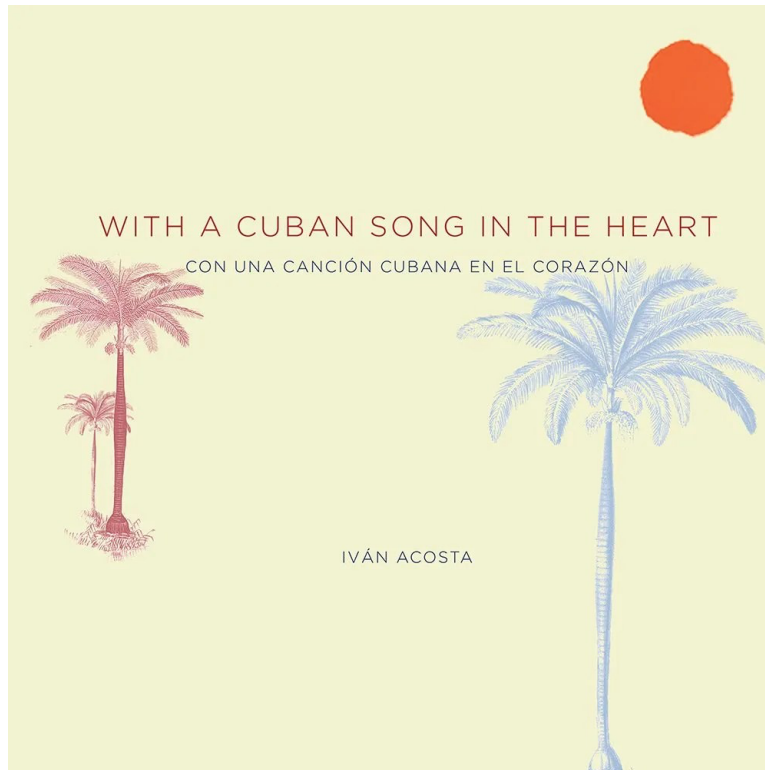
"*Shout 71* revolutionized the Latino theater scene in New York, and won several awards. Earlier, in 1969, he had worked as an actor and singer in two very Cuban musicals: *Mephistopheles* and *Pachencho's wakew* with music by maestro Enrique Ubieta. By 1976 I began to write *The Super* which I also directed. We premiered it in the theater hall of the Cuban Cultural Center in New York, in November 1977, and since then many snowfalls have fallen.

"*The Super* From the first night of its premiere, it was very well received. We played a lot of Cuban music through the acts and blackouts. The play ended with a rich guaguancó entitled *Cute Cuba* and a Cuban descarga in the voice of Virgilio Martí with the Conjunto Experimental Nuevayorquino. It ran for four months, which is unusual for a Cuban piece in Spanish, in that city and in 1979 the film was released, which toured hundreds of theaters and festivals around the world with great success. León Ichaso, Orlando Jiménez and Manolo Arce were in charge of the film production".

Tell me about your work as a composer, how did your songs come about? How was your experience in OTI and in the New Cuban Exile Song movement?

"In 1969 I sang for the first time in public, at the Liborio Club in New York. Later on, together with poet Omar Torres, singer-songwriter Pedro Tamayo and troubadour Hansel Henrique, we founded the New Cuban Exile Song group. The same was done in Miami by Sergio Fiallo, Marisela Verena, Alicia Rodríguez and Roberto Lozano, among others.

"We presented recitals and concerts in theaters, cultural centers and universities. I composed and sang with a group led by guitarist Paul Radelat, and later with guitarist and director Sergio García-Marruz. I sang at the Congresses of Intellectuals for the Freedom of Cuba in Paris, Madrid, Caracas, Washington D.C. and New York. I also performed on various stages in Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, Philadelphia, Puerto Rico and at the OTI Festival in New York, where we won second place with my song "The Cuban Freedom Festival". *To be your love and not your master*. And we recorded two LPs: *Songs of life, of homeland, of love*, e *Iván Acosta, singer-songwriter*. I also have a few dozen unreleased songs".



Cover of the book *Con una canción cubana en el corazón*, by Iván Acosta.

How did the idea of *With a Cuban song in my heart* come about? Is it like a creative biography, illustrated with covers and music?

"The publication of that book was a miracle. Those who have read it comment that it is a good book, very creative and original. It has more than 280 color illustrations and 80 vignettes written by me; each story is indirectly linked to a song, a singer, an orchestra. It is a luxury book, a *coffee table book* the size of an LP. It contains two discs with 26 songs, which are mentioned in the contents. And the 280 Cuban LP covers that appear in the book are selected from my collection.

"Lisa and Julie Nemrow, the directors of Un-Gyve Press in Boston, fell in love with the concept of the book, and after three years of preparation, they launched into publishing it. So far we are having a very good reception, both in the Anglo and Latino markets, because the volume is bilingual. It is distributed at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Target and several local bookstores!

Who had an important influence on your work in the musical field?

"As founder and director of Latin Jazz USA I have had the opportunity to share extensively and intensely with musicians of the caliber of Chico O'Farrill, Paquito D'Rivera, Mongo Santamaría, Celia Cruz, Rey Barretto, Astrud Gilberto, Dizzy Gillespie, Bobby Sanabria, Xiomara Laugart, Tito Puente, Hilario Durán, Cachao, Arturo Sandoval, Tony Bennett, and with the legendary maestro Cándido Camero, as well as with my son Amaury Acosta's band (U)nity. From each of

them I have fond memories and enormous teachings. In the particular cases of Chico O'Farrill, Bobby Sanabria and Cándido Camero we developed an almost family-like friendship.

"When I met Cándido I was creative director of an advertising agency. We were producing a Latin jazz campaign for a beer. He always had an old album with more than 500 photographs of the artists he had recorded or played with on hundreds of stages around the world. So they used him as a bongos player or conguero in a corner of the orchestra. And it occurred to me to film a documentary about the life of this exceptional Cuban musician. I told him: 'I would like to make a film about your life'. It took me almost five years to convince him, until we were finally friends. I filmed with him for two years in concerts, on the streets of New York, on stages and in studios. And I set out to get him out of the corner, I started producing concerts for him, through Latin Jazz USA, under the name of *Cándido*, "*Hands of fire*". where he was the central star. Thus, we were able to present the great percussionist on more than ten major stages. We also recorded several albums, including *Cándido*, "*Hands of fire*". with an orchestra of superstars from the world of jazz and Cuban popular music.

"For those who don't know, Camero has recorded over 700 albums, with hundreds of jazz and popular music stars, including Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Mongo Santamaria, La Lupe, Gloria Estefan and Xiomara Laugart. Tony Bennet has said: 'When in 1946 Candido Camero arrived in New York with his three tumbadoras, jazz was changed forever'".

Do you think that the Cuban population, especially young people inside the island and abroad, will again recognize the fullness, richness and diversity of Cuban music?

"In 1961, Cuba was already censoring several musicians and singers, which led to the exodus of many of the most important talents of the Cuban pentagram. Then came the U.S. embargo against the Cuban government. But the exiled artists, for the most part, continued with their careers on the stages of the world, some with great success, as in the cases of Pérez Prado, José Fajardo, Olga Guillot, Celia Cruz, Luisa María Güell, La Sonora Matancera, Guillermo Portabales, La Lupe or Ernesto Lecuona. And thanks to Cuban musicians in exile, and to our brothers in Puerto Rico, Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela, the Cuban music of the golden age was able to remain alive and popular.

"It is undoubtedly a pity that most Cuban musicians in exile are not allowed by the Cuban government to perform in their own homeland. However, many Cuban musicians and singers living on the island come and go 'like Peter in his own house'. And even the exile 'hardliners' have already gone to applaud them. At this point there should be no such division. Cuban music is one, that of the island, that of the exile and that of the world. That is the one I carry in my heart.

In the long run, do you think that the diaspora will have favored a greater diffusion of our music around the world or was it definitely harmful?

"There are several cities in the United States and in other countries such as France, Italy and Spain, where there are radio programs that only broadcast Cuban music. In New York we have three or four stations that each program at least four hours a week of pure Cuban music. The same happens in Miami, Los Angeles, Denver, Boston, Chicago and others. And in the same way, many young people are now looking for and buying vinyl LPs, and are beginning to research and search for the Cuban orchestras of the 40s, 50s and 60s of the 20th century".



Iván Acosta. Photo: Courtesy of the interviewee.

What genres do you think are still relevant in the repertoire of young composers, both inside and outside the island?

"In the last 20 years many young musicians on the Island have been revisiting the musical roots and extraordinary recordings are being produced, with fusions of traditional Cuban rhythms and modern touches and *avant gard*. This is very encouraging. They are beginning to dust off the origins and roots of the rich variety of Cuban music.

At one time, in Cuba, music was kidnapped by the nueva trova. But, already in the mid 70's, good popular music orchestras emerged, with good results: Irakere, Los Van Van, Adalberto Álvarez, Dan Den, Síntesis or David Álvarez, among many others".

On a personal note, what do you like most about Cuban music?

"I am a fan of Dámaso Pérez Prado's mambos. I think that, of the popular Cuban rhythms, the mambo is the richest and most complex, musically speaking. There are thousands of mambos, but none like those composed and performed by Pérez Prado's super orchestra. I also enjoy the pachangas, the chachachás and the sones of Orquesta Aragón, Fajardo y sus Estrellas, Orquesta América and the very popular Charanga 76, which emerged in exile. I also like the bolero filin and country music, especially the guajira interpreted by Guillermo Portabales, Eliades Ochoa or La India de Oriente, as well as those of Ramón Veloz. I like many of the songs of Pablo Milanés and my fellow countryman David Álvarez. And a lot of new popular music that is being created on the island. Of the more lyrical or serious I love the dances of Ignacio Cervantes; the creations of the master Gonzalo Roig; those of Amadeo Roldán or the most classic of José White. And, of course, the great maestro Ernesto Lecuona. I have been promoter and producer of several concerts and records of Cuban and Latin jazz".

If you were a guru, how do you envision the creative musical future of Cubans? And in art in general?

"Cuban artists have distinguished themselves in the world for their extraordinary talent. Since the 19th century, they have stood out in any branch of the arts. In literature, in classical, modern or folkloric ballet; in theater; in cinematography, plastic arts, radio and television, and of course, in music. And in spite of the political problems, Cubans, both those on the island and those in exile, have known how to preserve the creation of sound. It is impressive to see young musicians who have recently arrived on stage together with those who have been living abroad for a long time, forming an explosive mix, musically speaking.

"My son, Amaury Acosta, has turned out to be a tremendous drummer, arranger and director of (U)nity, which is made up of five young, excellent musicians. Three years ago they were playing at the Zinc Bar Jazz Club in the Village of New York, and some Japanese producers, impressed, offered them to film a documentary playing in Havana.

"Well, Amaury, with pianist Axel Tosca Laugart and Luques Curtis, Eddie Palmieri's bassist, agreed to go. The most interesting thing about that trip was the result: to see these young Cuban-American and New York jazzmen unloading with young music students in Havana... It was exciting to see how they merged, in the embrace of brothers, dialoguing, laughing and interpreting masterfully so much. *standards* The musicians who have just graduated from jazz as well as other pieces created by new musicians, recently released, with a quality and musical professionalism comparable to the best in the world.

"Amaury, born and raised in the quaint Manhattan neighborhood of Hells Kitchen, returned from the island with a transfusion of Cuban musicality, just as the three of them injected it into these bright young people with great professional futures. By the way, you can watch the

documentaries *(U)nity is Power* on YouTube and Kingklave.com. It is worth it. So, I reiterate, how nice it would be if the regime would suspend its own embargo, and allow exile artists to perform and produce in Cuba.

"In closing, from my personal life I am the grandfather of a beautiful little girl, Penelope Ana, daughter of our daughter Yaritza and her husband Albert. My wife Teresa and I are enjoying very much this stage as grandparents. And my dream, like most of the almost three million Cubans living outside the archipelago, would be to be able to enjoy an open and fair Cuba for all and for the good of all. In the meantime, I continue *with a Cuban song in my heart*"

***The original version of this interview appeared in the book *All for the love of Cuban music*, Amazon Publishing, 2020.**



MAYRA A. MARTÍNEZ