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Recording Folklore in Key West

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Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Florida

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LANGUAG

, DIALECTS, INFLE:CTIO
Among the groups which should be represented, among them from Key West itself, Hispanics, descendants of Cuban immigrants, Spaniards, descendants of Spanish gallegas (peasants), Cubans Negroes, Mexicans, Spanish-speaking West Indian Negroes, Bahamans (a variety of dialects), English-speaking West Indian Negroes, descendants of New England settlers, Florida crackers, tourists from various sections (?).

CUBAN LORE

Comprising approximately one-third of the total population, the Cubans have perhaps contributed most to the folklore of Key West. Although the greatest influx of Cubans occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century, there has subsequently been a certain amount of continuous immigration. The radio, reasonable excursion rates to Cuba (ninety miles distant), and a Spanish-speaking Key West school supported largely by the Cuban Government, have served to maintain close cultural relations with Cuba, and to constantly replenish and alter the Cuban lore in Key West. The Latin (Cuba-Italian) colony of Tampa (Ybor City), also influenced the lore of Key West through correspondence between relatives, visits and an interchange of residence.

Viandero (Venadero)

In Cuba, street vendors are numerous, popular, invariably portadores. There are three colorful vendors in Key West; two Cubans and a Bahaman Negro. Many families regularly depend upon them for vegetables, fruit, fish. They cry their wares in a rhythmic and poetic chant of remarkable volume, combining Spanish and English. Their stories vary with their wares, but the following is a typical example:

Agua de China tengo, naranja, de China yo llevo
Tangarina y toronja, también plátano muy bueno

(I have ripe avocados, orange from China. I carry:
Tangerine and grapefruit, also very good plantain.)
Guas&s & Quaa& Freac& Jew-fish
Fresh Conch! Serrucho!
Kingfish! And Conch

Recording and filming recommended for all vendors.

Cantante Callejero (Rambling Singer)
There are several Cuban boys, about eighteen years of age, who wander about the streets in the late afternoon and evening, playing guitars and singing Cuban songs. Most of the songs they play are popular in Cuba, and were learned by listening to the radio; however, the singers improvise additional verses of their own, usually humorous and often lewd, and therefore of much delight to their listeners. Almost always poetical and well-adapted to the original songs, the improvisations frequently become popular and traditional.

Septeto (Sextet)
The Septeto consists of six players of Cuban musical instruments. One or more of the players are also soloists, and the entire Septeto often sings. The instruments include, clave, maracas, bongo, marimba, guitars, sometimes bass violas and charango. These instruments, and the manner in which they are played, are the most interesting aspects of the Septeto. In costume and motion the Septeto would be all worth recording and filming.

Arrullo (Lullaby)
Cuban mothers in Key West sing many songs to their babies. Although most of these lullabies have been published in Cuba, they are said to be very old folk songs brought from Spain.

Grand March
It is not learned immediately. It is often not learned until after the bars close at the soda fountain on which it originated at the height of the Havana dance craze. It is now learned in schools and dances.
The main movement into the appropriate region, one of type 4, which is a further step in the global analysis. The model is based on the assumption that the movement is due to the presence of a global field, which is generated by the interaction of the constituent parts. This field is thought to be responsible for the observed phenomena, and it is hypothesized that it is the main driving force for the movement.

Rumba, Conga, La Comparza

The Cuban folk dances are very popular with the Cubans in Key West. On special occasions, such as Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve, friends and relatives gather for a feast, after which they drink wine, rum, etc., and dance the rumba until a late hour. Several local nightclubs which cater to the Cuban population by playing Cuban dance music are heavily patronized.

La Comparza consists of a chorus of men and women in rumba costumes; the men approach from one direction, the women from the other, all dancing a Conga step to the accompaniment of African rhythms played on the bongo. They form a straight line, like this.

The inside man and woman form a team and give an interpretation of the rumba, the next man and woman follow with their interpretation, etc.; until all have danced. Then the entire group forms couples, which dance in a line; the exit is made with the Conga step and music. A recording and filming of the Comparza would capture much of the color and rhythm of the Cuban and Negro dances.

Bolita

This gambling game is of special interest in connection with Key West, where it was probably played for the first time in the country. The Florida Federal Cigarette Project compiled a comprehensive history of bolita, as well as information on its present existence and influence.
The Olban National Lottery is extremely popular with the Olbana in Key West. Tickets are sold by local agents, many of whom are financed locally; that is, they themselves (or their sponsors) pay on whatever numbers win in the actual lottery, and in the same amounts. When anti-gambling laws are enforced, as they sporadically are, the sale of lottery tickets continues, although bolita houses cease operations temporarily. The results of the lottery are announced by radio from Havana each Wednesday. The great majority of Olban-owned radios in Key West are tuned to that station, whether inhabitants of the house have bought tickets or not, and the announcements reverberate throughout the Olban sections.

The winning lottery numbers, which are quite large, are of course announced in Spanish, and are read out over the radio by orphans, who are among those benefited by the net proceeds of the lottery. One orphan calls the numbers 1 and another immediately calls the amount of money won by that number; the result is a continuous and monotonous sing-song chant. This chant, which lasts for over two hours, is a dominant feature of Wednesday afternoons, and about be recorded.

The Spanish-speaking Olban Negroes in Key West have a rich fund of lore. Their influence upon the lore and customs of Cuba has been profound, and is reflected to a considerable degree in Key West. This is particularly true in regard to voodoo, musical instruments, dances, spirit possession, and religious and tribal cults of African origin, which have become very popular in Olban and attracted a following of Cubans of Spanish descent, who also contributed to the African ritual and lore. Though not so powerful formerly, these cults are still prevalent in Olban and are prominent in Olban Negro America. The treatment of the Negro by the whites has been contrasting the Olban Negro and white community, and in the Olban sections, the need or fear of discrimination.

One brief section of the lengthy and ornate marches taken to the park in the Olban National Lottery was described by one of the winning numbers.
An appreciation of the material mentioned should be produced by
those who have observed the various aspects of the nanigo
rituals and their relationship to the community. The nanigo
rituals are of great historical significance and have
influenced the music, musical instruments, dances, superstitions,
and folklore of both Negro and white Cubans. A thorough
investigation indicates that a complete and authentic
presentation of the nanigo rituals, initiation ceremonies,
dances, and so on, could be arranged, provided the
necessary materials for costumes, instruments, etc., are
forthcoming.

An aged nanigo in Key West, a fugitive from the Cuban
Government because of a nanigo murder committed by
him, and who was active in the nanigo group in Key
West, is available to direct the preparation of costumes, equipment,
and to rehearse the rituals and dances. A group of young
persons are available who know the nanigo dances,
in part.

It is the opinion of the writer that the filming and recording
of the ritual, initiation, and dance series of the nanigos
would have outstanding value, and constitute the most
important opportunity offered the folklore recording
expedition in Florida.

If the sponsors of the expedition are interested, a detailed
description of all available information prepared
will be forwarded to them.
Negro Banjo Players

There are a number of Negroes who have banjos, which they play at some gathering place or street corner, most often on Saturday nights. Some of them sing, and have excellent voices.

Poot Floogie

This unusual dance was created by small Negro boys as a means of earning money from tourists; its success indicates that it will become a traditional folk attraction. Probably the creation of the dance was inspired by the popular ditty "Fiat Foot Floogie" heard currently over the radio and on records played on juke organs.

A group or about ten Negro boys, between the ages of seven and eleven, gather at barbecue stands, hotels—wherever there is a juke organ or other music—and, barefooted, stomp out a resounding and rhythmical accompaniment on the concrete sidewalk. All members of this talented dance group are bloused with extraordinarily large and flat feet; well-adapted to making the slapping sound.

The dance has proven so popular with tourists that the boys have profited to such an extent that they live in new suits, hats, ties, and large white shoes which they remove while dancing. As they dance throughout the day and until late at night during the tourist season, they very likely contributed to the structure of Coral Beach, first settled in the Bahama Islands and migrated to the Florida Keys. Their lore is of English origin, influenced by the Spanish-Carib and Negro.

For examples of this lore see our Section C, "Florida Folklore," by John H. Harry Guide; Washington, D.C., in the future.
When salvaging wrecked vessels was a profitable enterprise on the Florida Keys, for lack of a better means of communication, the message that a vessel had gone on a reef was carried miraculously up the Keys by plaintive notes blown on Bugle-Conch shells. The Bugle-Conch—a prehistoric snail—isout, and the shell is blown in the same manner as a bugle. This means of communication was developed in some instances into an elaborate mode for transmitting a variety of messages. Children in Key West still blow Conch bugles for amusement. There are any number of persons available who could blow a bugle for the purpose of recording the sound.

COMMUNITY CHECKERS

In the center of the town there is a vacant lot which serves as a park of sorts, where the chief focus of recreation are checker tables and gossip. The habitués of the checker tables are long-handled; many of them apparently have no vocation, or other avocation.

This center of folklore dissonance is certainly worth filming, and would be an ideal spot for the recording of folklore.
of a Sunday, tended off to the Park, Bahamian, old, oriental in the men's attire and in a few cases, in ancient colours in the women. The men are directed in their actions but are guided by the acts of the ancients, as indicated by the activities of the women. This group is an outstanding feature of Sunday night, not to mention their rapidity of speech, their point clearness and the lack of longer sentences.

In our opinion, as well as being bizarre, the group suffers from poor attention. Looking from the outside, it is hard to see the group's activities. However, when the group is approached, their activities become clear. The group's activities are often interpreted as a result of the social unrest, the desire for attention, and the lack of control by authority or the societal norms. The group's activities are a result of the social unrest, the desire for attention, and the lack of control by authority or the societal norms.
A-1 "Tom centite."
A conch song of the Bahamas, sung by J. Roberts, January 16, 1940.

A-2 "Tobacco is a roads-ed."
A recital played in the street, sung by J. Roberts, January 16, 1940.

A-3 "Birdie in the Tree."
J. Roberts, January 16, 1940.

A-4 "Bat, Bat Colla Under Hat."
J. Roberts, January 16, 1940.

A-5 "Jeremiel Jumped in the Fire."
J. Roberts, January 16, 1940.

A-6 "A Sweet Little Noodoodle."
J. Roberts, January 16, 1940.

B-1 "Old Senior Tuc."
A recital sung by J. Roberts, January 16, 1940.

B-2 "Gumbo Sitting Tuc."
J. Roberts, January 16, 1940.

B-3 "A Sweet Little Noodoodle."
J. Roberts, January 16, 1940.
A-3 "Jack and the Beanstalk." A child ballad to the tune of the popular English melody, sung by Felipe Sanchez, Havana, Cuba, January 15, 1948.

A-4 "When the Bell Stills Ring." A child ballad to the tune of the popular English melody, sung by Felipe Sanchez, Havana, Cuba, January 15, 1948.


B-1 "The Old Black cat." A conch folk sung by Sally Nelson, Riviera, Florida, January 15, 1940.

In imitation of Cuban, Rodriguez, Key West, Florida, January 18, 1940.

"Una Triste en La Playa." (One Afternoon in the Beach) A custom folk ballad arranged by Milton Esquinca, Key West, Florida, January 18, 1940.

"La cucaracha." (The Cockroach) arranged verses with local background. Sung by Felipe Valdez, guitar accompaniment by Milton Esquinca, Key West, Florida, January 18, 1940.

"Un Caballo de Palo." (The Horse of Wood) A song about a local Cuban boy composed and arranged by the Sestet of Cuban musical instruments including the cymbals, congo, bass viol, two guitars, and a singer. Key West, Florida, January 18, 1940.

"El Sacrificio." (The Sacrifice) A song composed by an American in Florida, and also popular in Key West. Played by the Sestet of Cuban instruments, January 18, 1940.
[Text content not legible or not present]
A-5 "Flowers."  Bahaman folk song, sung by a Bahaman Negro, accordion accompaniment, in Key West, Florida, January 23, 1940.

B-1 


B-3 Conversation and comment, not pertaining here.
I. A mosquito and the Five Flies, sung by Everett Mills, 1940.

II. "Nothing to Do but Sing," sung by Bethel Dog, 1940.

III. "I Want to Be a Soldier," sung by Everett Mills, 1940.

IV. "Whoa, My Horse Ain't Hi!" sung by Everett Mills, 1940.

V. "The Old Man and the Sea," sung by Everett Mills, 1940.
A-1 "The First Time I Saw Him, The Sunshine." Sung to a guitar with
a bass guitar, top ten, Florida, January 23, 1940.

B-1 "Bill Burroughs." "Every time begins with it." Sung to a
tape recorder with verses sung by Theodore Hall, a
bass guitar, top ten, Florida, January 23, 1940.

B-2 "The Crow." Sung by Theodore Hall, a
bass guitar, top ten, Florida, January 23, 1940.

B-3 "Hoist Up the John B." Sung by Theodore Hall, a
guitar, top ten, Florida, January 23, 1940.

B-4 "Sail Burroughs." "Quartet" Sung to a
tape recorder with piano, top ten, Florida, January 23, 1940.