

## **An Annotated Discography: “Conga Fusion” Recordings**

This post will deal with “Conga Fusion” recordings, which I define as commercial releases that combine substantial elements of both conga santiaguera (referred to as “conga” here) and other musical styles.

### **Conga-Descarga: The 1950 (?) Panart Session**

Strangely enough, the first “fusion” recording is also probably the oldest known recording of conga santiaguera.

“Conga en Oriente/Goza Mi Conga,” described in detail [here](#), combines the *conga* “groove” or rhythmic feel, corneta china, and acoustic piano and bass.

### **Conga-Jazz: New York, France and back to Santiago**

In 1983, percussionist Daniel Ponce (1953--2013), who arrived on the 1980 Mariel boatlift, recorded Ernesto Lecuona’s “Siboney” to a *conga* groove.

Ponce had performed with carnival comparsas in his native Havana and was probably familiar with the Santiago style. This track features Paquito D’Rivera soloing on sax and a minimal percussion section of agogô bells and bass drums.

“Siboney” refers to one of the indigenous tribes that inhabited Cuba before the arrival of the Spanish colonists and acts as a symbol for the island. It is also the name of a town near Santiago.

This track is significant because it is probably the first *conga santiaguera* recording made outside of Cuba; this groundbreaking album was Ponce’s first recording as a bandleader. Ponce’s aggressive but tasteful *tumbadora* (“conga drum”) playing had a huge impact on the New York Latin Jazz and rumba scenes.

In 1995 Cuban pianist Alfredo Rodriguez (1936 – 2005), who was living in France at the time, returned to Cuba to record the album “Cuba Linda.” The track “Para Francia Flores” features [La Conga de Los Hoyos](#) with longtime members “Nene” Garbey on lead vocals (in the guaguancó section), Ramon “Monguito” Camacho on quinto and Valentin Serrano on corneta china. It is probably the first documented example of a full *conga* ensemble collaborating on a “fusion” recording, in this case *conga* mixed with afro-cuban jazz. It is also likely the first of many collaborations featuring Los Hoyos.

Monguito played quinto in Los Hoyos from roughly 1980 to 2005. His playing style became a reference point and strong influence for future generations of quinto players, especially in Los Hoyos.

This album also includes “Tumba mi Tumba,” a collaboration with Santiago's *Tumba Francesa* Society, one of only three remaining on the island.

### **Jane y Los Hoyos Vienen Arrollando**

In 2001, Canadian sax/flute player Jane Bunnet released *Alma De Santiago*. This album features La Conga de Los Hoyos (including Monguito on quinto) on two tracks: “Jane y Los Hoyos” and “Donna Lee.”

“Jane y Los Hoyos,” is an innovative arrangement of *conga* which includes the Santiago Jazz Saxophone Quartet. This is a successful “jazz-conga” fusion because it combines both genres to produce a natural-sounding result.

“Donna Lee” is a mambo-jazz version of the Charlie Parker classic followed by a sudden segue into *La Conga*, with a few traditional coros (chants). “Alma De Santiago” also has a brief conga as a tag at the end.

### **Conga-Pop; representing Oriente: Micaela**

“Añoranza por la Conga” (informally known as “La Conga de Micaela”) by Ricardo Leyva and Sur Caribe (2005) is a huge milestone for La Conga and Santiagueros. A catchy dance number with lead vocals, strings and of course, El Cocoyé (La Conga de Los Hoyos), “Añoranza” is unique in that it retains the flavor and irresistible drive of La Conga while “dressing it up” with a full band (strings, trombones, etc) for “mainstream” dancefloor consumption.

The opening verses highlight the importance of *conga* to Santiaguero@s:

Micaela se fue pa´ otra tierra buscando caminos,  
que por buenos o malos quien sabe le impuso el destino.  
Solo vive llorando, sufriendo y pensando en su vino,  
que no es vino, señor; ni aguardiente, señor;  
es la conga, señor santiaguera.

(from <https://www.lyricsondemand.com/letras/s/surcaribelettras/aoranzaporlacongalettras.html>)

My translation:

Micaela left for another land seeking new horizons  
For better or worse, it was her destiny  
She just goes on crying, suffering, and thinking about her wine  
But it's not wine, sir, it's not brandy...  
It is the conga, sir. From Santiago.

The song was a big hit in Cuba and abroad; it won the Cubadisco 2006 Song of the Year award, and made it as far as [Walmart](#). One observer deemed it #6 of [Cuba's 20 biggest hits since 2000](#). I first heard it on a fairly mainstream playlist at a restaurant in Queens that I gigned at from 2016 to 2018. And of course it inspired at least one [satire](#).

In 2007, Sur Caribe released a conga version of “Hey Jude” as a homage to the Beatles, who had been deemed “counter-revolutionary” and banned (along with rock and jazz in general) for many years in Cuba.

The group’s next album, *Horizonte Próximo*, released in 2009, includes four more *conga* tracks.

### **Electro-Conga, Auto-Tune and The YouTube Era**

Starting around 2010, younger artists began mixing conga with genres like rap and reggaeton. Most of these tracks replace or supplement the *conga* percussion ensemble with a computer/sequencer generated beat.

“Hasta Santiago a Pie (Conga 500 Aniversario)”, by Kola Loka, celebrates Santiago’s “Quincentennial” with shoutouts to the city's *barrios*, and a guest appearance by La Conga de San Agustin.

Several Artists include footage of *conga* groups in their videos without any substantial *conga* element in their music. A few of these are in the playlist at the end of this post.

I'll note here that the terms “urban” and “música urbana” have become [controversial](#); I had been considering giving this section the title “Conga Urbana.”

### **Invasion Jazzistica**

In 2014, another Cuban pianist named Alfredo Rodriguez (b. 1985) released “The Invasion Parade” a tribute to [La Invasion](#), a long standing annual tradition where La Conga de Los Hoyos visits four of Santiago's rival Congas in a marathon street parade.

After studying conga with Feliz Navarro of Cutumba in 2000, I became hooked and eventually recorded the title track of Quimbombó’s *Conga Electrica*, which came out in 2008. I mixed some Brazilian percussion concepts with my knowledge of *conga* at that time and got a result that I'm proud of.

In 2016 Cuban Composer, pianist and flautist Oriente Lopez released “Arrollando el Carnaval” as part of his album *Abracadabra*. This track features multi-talented Angel Bonné (formerly with

Los Van Van) on vocals and clarinet. “Arrollando” combines Oriente’s angular jazzy arrangement with a slamming groove that makes you want to take to the streets.

### **Surpassing Havana?**

This post actually included many more tracks than I expected. Could it be that, in the 21st Century, Conga Santiaguera has a stronger presence on Cuban playlists and dancefloors than its rival from Havana? Is this a “boom” brought on by the success of “Añoranza por la Conga”? That’s a rabbit hole for another day....

### **Discography**

Note: my recommended tracks are ***bold and underlined***.

Conjunto Corneta China. “**Conga en Oriente /Goza Mi Conga.**” Panart, 1950(?), 78 RPM.

Ponce, Daniel “**Siboney.**” *New York Now*, Celluloid, 1983.

Rodriguez, Alfredo (1936 – 2005). “**Para Francia Flores.**” *Cuba Linda*, Hannibal/Rykodisc, 1996.

Percussion: La Conga de Los Hoyos

Lead Vocals: “Nene” Garbey

Bunnett, Jane. “**Jane y Los Hoyos.**” *Alma de Santiago*, Blue Note, 2001.

Percussion: La Conga de Los Hoyos

Bunnett, Jane. “Donna Lee.” *Alma de Santiago*, Blue Note, 2001.

Percussion: La Conga de Los Hoyos

Bunnett, Jane. “Alma de Santiago.” *Alma de Santiago*, Blue Note, 2001.

Percussion: La Conga de Los Hoyos

Sur Caribe. “**Añoranza por la Conga.**” *Credenciales*, Egrem, 2005.

Percussion: La Conga de Los Hoyos

El Gremio. “Conga Latina.” *El Gremio*, Bis Music, 2006.

Sur Caribe. “Ay! Qué Felicidad.” *Ay! Qué Felicidad*, Egrem, 2007.

Percussion: La Conga de Los Hoyos

Sur Caribe. “Hey Jude.” *Ay! Qué Felicidad*, Egrem, 2007.

Percussion: La Conga de Los Hoyos

Quimbombó. "Conga Eléctrica." *Conga Eléctrica*, Testa Dura, 2008.  
Percussion: Bloco La Conga (then known as Bloco Quimbombó)

Sur Caribe. "Arrollando por la Ciudad." *Horizonte Próximo*, Egrem, 2010.  
Percussion: La Conga de Los Hoyos

Sur Caribe. "Bonito Bonito." *Horizonte Próximo*, Egrem, 2010.  
Percussion: La Conga de Los Hoyos

Sur Caribe. "Donde mi Cubana." *Horizonte Próximo*, Egrem, 2010.  
Percussion: La Conga de Los Hoyos

Kola Loka. "**Hasta Santiago a Pie (Conga 500 Aniversario)**." *La Alianza*, Cubamusic Records, 2016.

Chepin Reggae. "Conga Dans." *Mi Barrio*, Yandris Araujo, 2013  
Corneta China: Walfrido Valerino

Cubanos en La Red. "La invasion." *Con Flow Guajiro*, Caribe Sound, 2013  
Percussion: La Conga de Los Hoyos

Willetts, David. "Trueno De Chango." *Tem*, David Willetts, 2013

Alejandro, Edesio. "Alalae." 2013

Rodriguez, Alfredo (b. 1985). "**The Invasion Parade**." *The Invasion Parade*, Mack Avenue, 2014.

Percussion: Pedrito Martinez  
Drum Set: Henry Cole

López, Oriente, "**Arrollando El Carnaval**." *Abacadabra*, OHL Music, 2016.

Lead Vocals: Angel Bonné  
Percussion: Mauricio Herrera

### **Sources:**

[Conga Fusion Youtube Playlist](#)

<https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/la-conga>

Correspondence with Lazaro Bandera, musical Director of La Conga de Los Hoyos

**Other Recommended Links:**

<https://www.ritmacuba.com/chronologie-des-instruments-du-carnaval-Est%20de%20Cuba.html#23> (in French)

more about Sur Caribe: <http://www.cubamusic.com/Store/Artist/1332>

Alfredo Rodriguez (1936 – 2005):

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfredo\\_Rodr%C3%ADguez](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfredo_Rodr%C3%ADguez)

[http://www.anapapaya.com/especial/e\\_ardrig.html](http://www.anapapaya.com/especial/e_ardrig.html)

An inspired essay on “Cuba Linda”

<https://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/404/Listening-in-DetailPerformances-of-Cuban-Music>