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CUBA

Manuel Galbán

Timing Is Everything

You know that big-reverb, Latin-flavored electric guitar sound that you expect to hear in both cool bachelor pads and spaghetti Westerns? Well, Manuel Galbán practically invented it back in the 1960s, with Cuban doo-wop group Los Zafiros, a forgotten gem of Fidel's island rediscovered by producer Nick Gold in the late '90s. Check out the compilation *Bossa Cubana* (Nonesuch): the bouncy arpeggios and smart, short leads are more refined than the work of any surf band from the same era.

"Guitar was the only accompanying instrument [in the band]," says Galbán through an interpreter. "I tried to make the parts as complete as possible, working simultaneously on bass strings and melody ones. This is the reason everyone knows *Los Zafiros* as four voices and one guitar. In the '60s we usually used spring reverb units because you can create a more natural effect with them. Actually, a lot of digital effects now are still influenced by the sounds from those years."

In addition to a Hopf archtop and a Fender Telecaster, Galbán also plays tres, the Cuban acoustic guitar (see "Tools of Transcendence" sidebar). While traditional tres playing is characterized by romantic melodies and off-kilter, African-influenced rhythms, his personal style is also informed by the piano, an important instrument in Cuba: "I've been influenced by pianists like Pedro Justiz and Lili Martínez, and as I'm a pianist as well, I use the same tech-

nique to adapt piano *tumbaos* [rhythms] and translate them to the guitar."

Ry Cooder revived Galbán's career by hiring him for the 1996 *Buena Vista Social Club* sessions, with elderly heartthrob crooner Ibrahim Ferrer. He also cut a CD of dreamy guitar duets with Galbán, *Mambo Sinuendo* (Nonesuch)—although Cooder apparently had trouble adapting to the Cuban way of playing around the beat, and hesitating ever so slightly.

"Basically, for foreign people it's difficult to understand the *syncopa* [syncopation] that is fundamental in our music," Galbán says. "Even for Ry Cooder it was a bit difficult, but with his experience he quickly understood the essence of Cuban music."

Yep, it's all in the timing.

