

A Listening Eye: The Films of Mike Dibb
Part Two: The Arts of Improvisation

Week One

Available to view 29 January – 04 February 2021

For the fourth week of *A Listening Eye*, we focus on Mike Dibb's music and dance documentaries, which showcase a remarkable sympathy towards many traditional musical and classical art forms, from the Afro-Spanish roots of Cuban Music to the island's revolutionary ballet and the vanguardist tangos of Astor Piazzolla. All these films celebrate unusual lives and exceptional talent, replete with beautifully filmed performances by wonderful musicians and dancers.

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What's Cuba Playing At? 1985, 75'

Classically Cuban, 1983, 60'

Tango Maestro: the Life and Music of Astor Piazzolla, 2005, 86'

What's Cuba Playing At?

1985 BBC 75'

In answer to the question posed by its title this lyrical filmed journey around Cuba went behind the political headlines in search of the Afro-Spanish roots of Cuban music, along the way revealing the wonderful range of this country's exuberant and life-affirming music that was everywhere being heard, played and danced to, in theatres, public spaces, traditional music venues, recording studios, village halls and family porches, in different regions of the island.

During this journey we also met and learnt much from three very interesting and articulate people, each of them concerned with a different aspect of their country's popular cultural traditions: Miguel Barnet, author of "Autobiography of a Runaway Slave", the musicologist Danilo Orozco, who both explains and demonstrates the principal forms of Cuban music and the complexity and richness of the drum rhythms that underpin its broad appeal, and Rogelio Fure from Cuba's National Popular Dance company, some of whose striking work we filmed, most vividly their dynamic Saturday Rumba event in which a few highly talented amateur dancers, both young and old, mixed with members of the company in a highly enjoyable competitive session, with which the film ends.

The film's other featured bands and great performers included the ever popular Los Van Van, Pablo Milanes, The Urfe Brothers, Chucho Valdes and Irakere, Santiago's Septeto de la Trova, La Tumba Francesa, El Grupo Changui, and, most importantly for the historians of popular dance, the wonderfully charming violinist and creator of the Cha Cha Cha Enrique Jorrin, who was still going strong and was filmed leading his orchestra in an open air Havana dance competition.

Classically Cuban

1983 BBC 60'

Alicia Alonso first became well known as a principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre in New York. After the revolution in 1959 she returned to Cuba, where Castro's government voted substantial funds for the creation and continued maintenance of The Cuban National Ballet Company, about whose history and work Alicia talks passionately in a long conversation in English which flows in and out of the film.

When it was being made the company she dominated was numbering well over 100 classically trained dancers, over whose lives and performances Alicia presided with an attentive eye that seemed to miss nothing, despite her failing eyesight.

Also despite her age, which she was determined not to reveal, she was still performing Giselle in a production that we filmed and which included Alicia's daughter playing her mother!

We also filmed members of the company in their ballet classes, as well as performing short extracts from famous classical ballets to workers in a local steel factory, an occasion whose climax involved a complete performance by two terrific dancers of "El Rio y El Bosque" ("The River and the Forest"), an original and uniquely choreographed Cuban ballet which ends the film.

Tango Maestro: The Life and Music of Astor Piazzolla

2004-05 BBC/DD 106'

Astor Pantaleon Piazzolla was born on 12th March 1921 in Mar del Plata, Argentina, as the only child of poor Italian immigrants. The family moved to New York City when Astor was four. His father gave him his first bandoneon when he was nine, which he has bought at a pawnshop for \$19. In addition to lessons on that instrument, Piazzolla also studied with classical pianist Bela Wilder in 1933, becoming an ardent fan of Bach and Rachmaninov.

Around the same time, the budding prodigy met and played with Carlos Gardel, appearing as a newspaper boy in Gardel's watershed tango film, *El Dia Que Me Quieras*. In 1937, Piazzolla's family returned to Mar del Plata, and his passion for tango music was fired anew by violinist Elvino Vardaro's sextet. At only 17, Piazzolla moved to Buenos Aires, seeking work as a musician. He played in a few tango orchestras until 1939 when he realised his dream of playing bandoneon with the widely renowned Anibal Troilo Orchestra, where he spent several high profile years. In the meantime, he continued his study of piano and music theory, counting future classical composer Alberto Ginastera (1941) and pianist Raúl Spivak (1943) as his teachers. He began composing for Troilo during this period, although his more ambitious, classically-influence pieces were often edited for accessibility's sake. In 1942 he married Dedé Wolff, with whom he had two children, Diana in 1943 and Daniel in 1944.

In 1944, Piazzolla left Troilo's group to lead the orchestra that was accompanying singer Francisco Fiorentino. Two years later he formed his own group, playing mostly traditional tangos yet already with hints of modernism. This group broke up in 1949 and Piazzolla, unsure of his musical direction, sought a way to leave tango behind for more refined pursuits. He studied Ravel Bartók and Stravinsky, also immersing himself in American jazz, and for the next few years

worked mostly on his compositional skills. His 1953 piece *Buenos Aires* caused a stir for its use of bandoneon in a classical orchestral setting.

In 1954, Piazzolla won a scholarship to study in Paris with the hugely influential Nadia Boulanger, who encouraged him not to ignore tango but to reinvigorate the form with his jazz and classical training. On his return home, he formed an octet that played tango as self-contained chamber music, rather than as an accompaniment for vocalists or dancers. The howls of protest from traditionalists continued unabated until 1958, when Piazzolla disbanded the group and went to New York City. There he worked as an arranger and experimented with a fusion of jazz and tango, also composing the famed *Adiós Nonino*, an ode to his recently departed father.

Returning to Buenos Aires in 1960, Piazzolla formed his first quintet, the "Quinteto Tango Nuevo", which would become the primary vehicle for his forward-looking vision. In 1963, under the direction of Paul Klecky, he premiered *Tres Tango Sinfónicos*, and in 1965 he made two of his most important records - one, of his concert at New York's philharmonic hall and the other, *El Tango*, a product of his friendship with poet Jorge Luis Borges. In 1967 Piazzolla collaborated with poet Horacio Ferrer to produce the groundbreaking so-called "Operita" *Maria de Buenos Aires*, which was premiered in 1968 by singer Amelita Baltar (who became Piazzolla's lover, and lived with him for the next seven years). Piazzolla and Ferrer next worked together on a series of "tango-canciones" (tango songs) producing his first genuine commercial hit, *Balada para un Loco* ("Ballad for a Madman") in 1969. In addition to composing songs and more elaborate pieces for orchestra, Piazzolla also scored numerous films of the period.

The seventies started out well for Piazzolla, as an acclaimed European tour gave him the opportunity to form a nine-piece group, "Conjunto 9"- the ideal chamber music formation he had always wanted. However, all was not well. Argentina's government was taken over by a conservative military faction, and everything that Piazzolla symbolised suddenly became politically unwelcome. In 1973, Piazzolla suffered a heart attack and he decided after his recovery that, with sentiments running high against him, it would be wiser for him to live in Italy. There he formed a group called the "Conjunto el Electronico", which placed the bandoneon at the forefront of what was essentially an electric-jazz ensemble.

This period also produced one of his most celebrated compositions, *Libertango*. In 1974 he separated from Amelita Baltar. That same year he cut an album, *Summit*, with jazz baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan, backed by Italian musicians. In 1975 he found a new favourite vocal interpreter in Jose Angel Trelles. In that year Anibal Troilo died, and Piazzolla composed the *Suite Troileana* in his memory. In 1976, he met Laura Escalada, who later became his second wife. That December he played an extraordinary concert back in Buenos Aires at the Gran Rex theatre with the "Conjunto Electronico", premiering the piece *500 Motivaciones*, and the following year he played another memorable concert at the Olympia in Paris.

Tiring of electronic music, Piazzolla formed a new quintet in 1978 and toured the world extensively whilst also composing new chamber and symphonic works. In 1982 he wrote *Le Grand Tango* for cello and piano, dedicated to Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and premiered by him in 1990 in New Orleans. In June 1983 he played a concert at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires that included the *Concert for Bandoneon and Orchestra*. His reputation grew steadily, making him a prime candidate for exposure in the US during the world-music craze of

the latter half of the 80s. In 1986, Piazzolla and his quintet, with American producer Kip Hanrahan, recorded what he considered the finest album of his career, *Tango: Zero Hour*". That same year he played the Montreux Jazz Festival with vibraphonist Gary Burton, resulting in the recording *Suite for Vibraphone and New Tango Quintet*. He won equally glowing reviews for *The Rough Dancer and the Cyclical Night* and staged a homecoming concert in New York's Central Park in 1987.

Unfortunately, at the height of his international fame, Piazzolla began to fail him and he underwent quadruple bypass surgery in 1988. He recovered well enough in 1989 to mount an international tour, having formed the "New Tango Sextet", with the unprecedented inclusion of two bandoneons. It was during this tour that he came to the BBC in Bristol, England to record the historic '*Tango Nuevo*' programme included in this film. The tour also included what would be his final concert in Argentina, at the *Teatro Opera* in Buenos Aires. That same year, the recording of *La Camorra* was released, and in 1990 he recorded a short album with the modern-classical Kronos Quartet, entitled *Five Tango Sensations*. Sadly, shortly after that, Piazzolla suffered a stroke that left him unable to perform or compose. After two wretched years in intensive care, he died on 4th July 1992 in his beloved Buenos Aires, leaving behind a monumental legacy as one of South America's greatest musical figures ever, and a major composer of the twentieth century.