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CUBA'S NATIONAL DANCE LIVES ON... IN MEXICO

Gliding in a yellow lace dress, Carolina Salinas fans herself languidly while the band burns through the sultry rhythms of the "danzon," Cuba's national dance. But this is no Havana night club. In fact, danzon has virtually vanished from Cuba. Today, it is being kept alive thanks largely to a passionate group of Mexican fans like Salinas. Danzon, a music and dance style blending European and African influences, was born in Cuba in the 19th century.

Its birthday is often given as January 1, 1879 — the date of a New Year's concert where Cuban composer Miguel Failde premiered a new song, "Las Alturas de Simpson," that took the traditional French contredanse and injected it with spicy Latin beats. The dance that grew up around this new genre is characterized by upright posture, swaying steps and repeating refrains during which the couples strut arm in arm or the women fan themselves coquettishly.

In the Mexican port of Veracruz, across the Gulf of Mexico from Cuba, couples gather four times a week to dance danzon, twirling around the central square in fedoras and evening gowns that evoke a bygone era. "In

danzon they teach you that image and posture are important for both the lady and the gentleman. Elegance, that's danzon," said Salinas, a 26-year-old teacher, her hair and make-up impeccable as she fanned herself during the "rest period" of the refrain. Mexicans have breathed new life into the tradition even as it has faded in Cuba. "If Mexico hadn't adopted danzon as an important part of its popular culture, it would have disappeared," said Miguel Zamudio, director of the National Center for Research and Promotion of Danzon, based in Veracruz.



Mexicans have breathed new life into the tradition

Flashy new moves Danzon arrived in Mexico soon after it was born, traveling first to the Yucatan peninsula, then Veracruz. Eventually it reached Mexico City, where it leapt to fame after featuring in a series of Mexican movies in the 1940s. The genre took on a life of its own in Mexico, whose musicians added many classics to the danzon canon. They include "Danzon No. 2," by the composer Arturo Marquez, a piece that has been performed by some of the world's top symphonies. The dance continues to develop in different ways across Mexico.



People gather to dance "danzon" at "Sociales Romo" dance and night club.

"In Veracruz they've kept alive a performance and dance style that is similar to the Cuban original, while in Mexico City danzon has blended with other genres and evolved," Zamudio said. In the capital, danzon lovers have made it their own, incorporating acrobatic turns and moves. But one constant that always remains is the "rest" during the refrains. "There are many legends about the rest: that it's when couples fall in love, that Cubans used it to pass on information about the revolution," said Zamudio.

When I'm 92

After the 1959 revolution, which toppled dictator Fulgencio Batista and brought Fidel Castro to power, danzon began a long decline in Cuba. But an aging handful of die-hard aficionados keep the flame burning. Ninety-two-year-old Oscar "The Prof" Penader is one of them. He still shows up regularly in a crisp suit and tie to dance at the Orange Creek Club, on the south side of Havana, where there are dances two Sundays a month.

Penader laments that most of the songs are trendy salsa numbers, instead of danzon. Interest in danzon "has declined a lot," he said. "If we don't keep it going, it will be a pity. We can't just talk about it, we need groups that practice it, and bands that play it well," he said. When the band does play danzon, he tosses away his cane and takes to the dance floor. "The music carries me," he said. "I feel it in my bones, in my soul." His fellow fans include Lazara Genes, 74, and Claudio Hernandez, 73, who met at the club 15 years ago — the start of a love affair for the two widowers. "He started flirting with me, very discreetly," said Genes.

It also turned out to be the start of a prize-winning run as dance partners that has seen the couple win danzon championships. A younger Cuban hoping to keep danzon alive is Ethiel Fernandez Failde, the 25-year-old great-great-grandson of the genre's founding father. Himself a musician, Fernandez Failde has a danzon band and promotes an annual festival celebrating the genre in the city of Matanzas. He hopes to see his reggaeton-obsessed generation rediscover danzon. "In Mexico, they dance danzon every day, there's a youthful movement around it," he said. "In Cuba, we don't have that anymore." — AP



A couple dances "danzon" at "Sociales Romo" dance and night club, in Santa Maria La Ribera neighborhood in Mexico City.



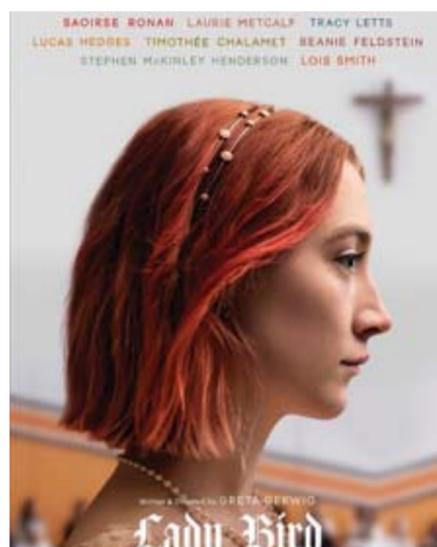
A couple poses at "Sociales Romo" dance and night club. — AFP photos

Greta Gerwig comes of age with 'Lady Bird'

Greta Gerwig has been an actress in 25 films, a co-writer on five and co-director of one. She's assembled wardrobes, done makeup and - thanks to her 5 foot-9-inch height - held the boom mic. She has, in a sense, been building up for a long time to her directorial debut: "Lady Bird."

"I was accumulating my 10,000 hours," Gerwig said in a recent interview in a tucked-away room at Lincoln Center. "When I finished this script, I thought: You're still going to learn things but you're not going to learn anything more by not doing it. Whatever learning happens now is going to happen by doing it. I just decided to take the leap." It's at this moment while contemplating the culmination of her professional life that a famished Gerwig first spies her lunch. "Oh my goodness it's a sammy," she exclaims - a revelation quickly followed by another. "Oh my feet are so dirty from standing outside barefoot."

For Gerwig, it comes naturally that the most earnest inner ambitions can appear, from the outside, a little funny, too. Gerwig's "Lady Bird," which opened Friday in New York and Los Angeles, is a loosely autobiographical coming-of-age story about a high-schooler named Christine with the self-proclaimed nickname "Lady Bird" (Saoirse Ronan) who aspires beyond her middle-class Sacramento life. From Roman Catholic school, she dreams of New York or at least "Connecticut or New Hampshire, where writers live in the woods."



'Incredibly open'
The film - richly detailed, shrewdly observed, altogether a beauty - has already found some of the best reviews of the year, placing it among the early awards-season favorites. It boasts numerous revelations - including the performances by Ronan and her fictional mother, Laurie Metcalf - but none more so than this one: Gerwig is an exceptional, fully formed filmmaker, right out of the gate.

"She nailed it in the way that she did because she's incredibly open to people and characters and places," says Ronan, speaking by phone from London. "One of the reasons why she's such a fantastic storyteller is because she's incredibly sincere. Everything that comes out of her, whether it's on the page or when she acts or when she directs, it only comes from the most genuine place."

Gerwig is also a proud cinephile. Claire Denis's "Beau Travail" first awakened her to cinema as something more than theater-on-film. "I thought, 'That is its own country,'" she remembers. During production on "Lady Bird," her email was overrun with screen grabs she snapped of relevant films. A sampling of inspirations: the low-key naturalism of Mike Leigh, Agnes Varda's "Cleo From 5 to 7," Eric Rohmer's blocking, Howard Hawks' dialogue ("I make talkies," says Gerwig), "America Graffiti" (shot in nearby Stockton, California), Chantal Akerman's rendering of a woman doing housework in "Jeanne Dielman." "Plainness with a purpose never gets rewarded the way it should," she says. "Our catchphrase for the way the film looked was: 'Plain and luscious.'"

Bittersweet thrill
A short description of "Lady Bird" tends to undersell it. While it has the basic framework of a teenage high-school film, Lady Bird's story - one of the bittersweet thrill of fumbling toward a much-yearned-for future - isn't told in isolation. Her relationship with her mom, an overworked nurse, is strained. The movie's working title was "Mothers and Daughters" - a conflict "as old as the hills," sighs Gerwig. "To me," she says, "that was always the central love story of the film."

"The movie is a bit of a Trojan horse, in a way," says Gerwig. "Around the middle, it catches and you kind of realize there's something very aching and sad at the core of it even though it's funny and fast-paced. It's about young people but it's just as much about the other generation. It's about this whole community. It's not just this pinhole of this teenage girl. I've always disliked the coming-of-age title given to it. Every coming-of-age story in life is equally the story about the parent, the person who's letting go. It's secretly as much the mother's movie as much as it's her movie."

After first Skyping, Gerwig first met Ronan at the Toronto Film Festival in 2015 where they did a late-night read-through of the script, with Gerwig reading every character but Lady Bird. She came away so certain that the "Brooklyn" actress was ideal that she delayed the movie a year to fit Ronan's schedule. The meeting, Ronan says, was giddy and giggly. "We sobbed all the way through," said Ronan. "I was so, so nervous going into it. We had at least two glasses of white wine before we went so we were definitely on the vulnerable side. We were clutching each other one minute and laughing the next." — AP

DISNEY BARS LA TIMES FILM COVERAGE AFTER CRITICAL PIECE

In response to a Los Angeles Times series about the relationship between the Walt Disney Co. and the city of Anaheim that Disney claims is "biased and inaccurate," the company is barring the paper from advance screenings of its films and access to its talent. The editors of the Times said Friday that Disney declined access to its slate of films for the paper's holiday film preview citing "unfair coverage" of its business ties with Anaheim. Upcoming Disney films include "Thor: Ragnarok," "Coco" and "Star Wars: The Last Jedi."

The paper ran a two-part series in late September looking into what it characterized as a complicated and increasingly tense relationship between the city and the Disneyland Resort. The Times says it will review and cover Disney films when they become available to the public. Disney responded in a state-

ment Friday that the Times' series showed, "a complete disregard for basic journalistic standards."

"Despite our sharing numerous indisputable facts with the reporter, several editors, and the publisher over many months, the Times moved forward with a biased and inaccurate series, wholly driven by a political agenda," the statement continued. The Times reporter who wrote both pieces, Daniel Miller, tweeted that, "Disney never asked for a correction." Hillary Manning, the communications director for Los Angeles Times, said the paper had "no further comment" to the allegations made by Disney. Disney representatives have not responded to The Associated Press's request for details on which facts it is contesting in the series. — AP

Music Review

Sam Smith's 'Thrill of It All' is a thrill indeed

When Sam Smith debuted on the music scene in 2014, he sang beautiful and searing songs about love lapses and loneliness. There are moments you'd feel sad for him, but then you'd remind yourself not to pity the guy too much, because, wow, he has THAT VOICE. On his sophomore album, he's still singing emotional songs, but his growth is evident. And perfectly executed.

"The Thrill of It All" is simply that - a thrill - as Smith's piecing voice and vivid lyrics tell stories about his relationships and experiences over the last three years - the good, the bad, the sad and more. "Burning," which hits straight to the heart, is one of the brightest spots on the album, as Smith sings about the after effects once a relationship has ended. "I've been burning/Yes I've been burning/Such a burden/This flame on my chest," he sings on the piano tune, where a choir - or layered vocals - later comes in, bringing on a chilling feel.

Another highlight is "HIM," where Smith sounds powerful and most confident. "Don't you try and tell me that God doesn't care for us/It is him I love," he sings in a commanding tone, followed by a choir again - coming in at the right time. There's not a miss on the 10-track album. "Say It First," about wanting your partner to say they're in love before you do, is soft and relatable, while "No Peace," a duet with unsigned singer YEBBA, is a winner.

There are groovier jams, too, that will move your spir-

it, including "One Last Song," a song for the ex you're still in love with but need to be away from, and "Baby, You Make Me Crazy," with its sing-a-long hook. At times the latter track sounds like an advice column. "When the person that you love just says no?/Boy, get yourself together/Move on with your life," he sings.

Smith co-wrote each of the 10 songs, and even recruited new collaborators to help him out. Malay, who has worked with Frank Ocean and Zayn, lends his magic to "Midnight Train" and "Say It First"; Poo Bear, who has written many of Justin Bieber's hits, co-wrote "Burning"; Timbaland co-produced the closing track, "Pray"; and Grammy-nominated country singer Cam co-wrote "Palace." Jimmy Napes, who worked heavily on Smith's debut "In the Lonely Hour" and won the best original song Oscar with the British singer last year, also worked on seven songs. But at the core of it all, it is Smith, and that voice that emotes the lyrics so perfectly. "The Thrill of It All" is everything, and more. — AP

