



Women dance in a reggaeton competition during a beach event organized by Cuba's Union of Young Communists and the National Sports Institute in Havana in this July 23, 2006 file photo. PHOTO: REUTERS

To record his next hit, El Micha, one of Cuba's rising stars of reggaeton music, which blends reggae, Latin and electronic rhythms, just has to knock on his neighbor's door.

A microphone plugged into an old computer in an apartment in Havana's working-class suburb of Reparto Electrico serves as the studio where some of Cuba's most successful reggaeton songs are recorded.

"Reggaeton is unstoppable because it is recorded at home. It is totally independent," says Michael "El Micha" Sierra, 27, a former basketball player whose bottom row of gold teeth flash when he gives one of his frequent broad smiles.

With little official support or air time on state-controlled radio, the songs Cuban reggaeton artists record in makeshift studios lined with egg cartons for sound insulation are mostly transmitted through homemade CDs and on computer flash memory sticks.

That is how the tropical fever of reggaeton is sweeping communist-ruled Cuba, captivating its youth and enraging a cultural establishment alarmed by the vulgarity of some of its lyrics, which include phrases like "Coge mi tubo" ("Grab my pipe") and "Melela" ("Stick it in").

"Cubans know about music and if they picked reggaeton they have to be respected. The people are the ones who decide," said Sierra.

Reggaeton, a cocktail of reggae, Latin and electronic rhythms, first became popular in Puerto Rico in the mid-1990s and has spread rapidly through Latin America. In Cuba, it is played on crowded buses, shakes neighborhood windows with its throbbing bass and packs discos night after night.

Its vibrations even seem to be shaking Cuba's cultural establishment, decades after the island shook the entertainment music world with its native-born mambo and cha cha cha.

Like hip-hop, its relative, reggaeton chronicles real life in the streets. But its popularity stems from a catchy, sensual rhythm that is perfectly suited for dance-crazy Cubans.

#### OFFICIAL ALARM OVER 'NEOLIBERAL' MUSIC

"Teachers and family cannot be naive regarding this matter," warned state-controlled TV as it showed six-year-olds doing covers of Puerto Rican reggaeton megastar Daddy Yankee.

That was the latest sign of official alarm over what the authorities see as a vulgarization of Cuban culture.

The official daily *Juventud Rebelde* called reggaeton a reflection of "neoliberal thinking" and Culture Minister Abel Prieto said it should be "pushed away."

"In the cultural world there is concern about the excessive popularity of reggaeton," Julian Gonzalez, president of the National

## Cubans dance to a new 'ton'

*Reggaeton, a Spanish-language blend of reggae, Latin and electronic influences, is captivating the youth of the communist country — and enraging a cultural establishment alarmed by the vulgarity of some of its lyrics*

BY ESTEBAN ISRAEL  
REUTERS, HAVANA

Council for Visual Arts, said.

But at a disco in Guanabo, a beach resort just east of Havana where El Micha played on a recent Sunday, 28-year-old kindergarten teacher Selene showed little sign of concern, however, shaking her hips frenetically to the music.

"It is true, reggaeton can sometimes have vulgar lyrics. But I like it and dance it," she said. "Come on. Do they want young people to dance *danzon*?"

Some Cuban officials have suggested promoting more traditional Cuban dance rhythms like *danzon*, *son* and *casino* to counter the reggaeton offensive.

"Declaring war on reggaeton would be a mistake. These are not times for that kind of response," said Gonzalez.

He may be right, says Puerto Rican researcher Raquel Z. Rivera, co-editor of *Reggaeton*, a book recently published by Duke University Press. An attempt to ban it in Puerto Rico only made it more popular.

"Cuban authorities are wary for the same reason as authorities in other countries — reggaeton tends to be hypersexual and to glorify consumerism and fashion," she said.

#### PREJUDICES AND PIRACY

Cuban reggaeton musicians say prejudices keep them off the recording labels and radio airwaves. Their music cannot be found in stores. Fans simply burn their own CDs.

"In Cuba, reggaeton moves thanks to piracy," said El Micha.

A beginner typically records at a makeshift studio for US\$2 an hour, burns as many CDs as he can afford to and spreads them around. Some became famous giving free CDs to taxi drivers.

A few have achieved local success like Gente de Zona, Baby Lores or Kola Loka, and some even dream of breaking into the US market including Elvis Manuel, a 19-year-old reggaeton star who disappeared last year while trying to cross the Florida Straits to the US.

But most just fly under the radar only to emerge during weekends for concerts at state-owned discos.

"Reggaeton is treading a fine line between official and unofficial/independent worlds," said Geoff Baker, a lecturer at the University of London's Royal Holloway College who has researched the topic in Cuba.

Cuban reggaeton has a distinctive rhythm from its Puerto Rican roots, local musicians say. It is also less violent in its lyrics than the imported version.

"My lyrics talk about what young people live without getting into politics, because I don't really care about that. Reggaeton is music for people's pleasure," said El Micha as he got ready to go on stage.

## First Europeans were cannibals with a taste for youngsters, say archaeologists

*An historic discovery of the fossilized remains of the 'first European' humans was made in Spain, and revealed they liked to chomp on children*

BY VIRGINIE GROGNOU  
AFP, ATAPUERCA, SPAIN

The remains of the "first Europeans" discovered at an archaeological site in northern Spain have revealed that these prehistoric men were cannibals who particularly liked the flesh of children.

"We know that they practiced cannibalism," said Jose Maria Bermudez de Castro, one of the co-directors of the Atapuerca project, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

A study of the remains revealed that they turned to cannibalism to feed themselves and not as part of a ritual, and that they ate their rivals after killing them, mostly children and adolescents.

"It is the first well-documented case of cannibalism in the history of humanity, which does not mean that it is the oldest," he said.

The remains discovered in the caves "appeared scattered, broken, fragmented, mixed with other animals such as horses, deer, rhinoceroses, all kinds of animals caught in hunting" and eaten by humans, he said.

"This gives us an idea of cannibalism as a type of gastronomy, and not as a ritual."

The Atapuerca caves were first discovered in the late 19th century, when a tunnel was blasted through the mountain for a railway line.

"But at the time in Spain, there was not enough scientific knowledge to begin research," said the other co-director,

Eudald Carbonell.

The first excavations did not take place until 1978, then "in 1984, we found 150 human remains."

In 1992, they found a complete intact skeleton, and two years later, they discovered remains dating back more than 800,000 years.

Those remains probably correspond to the first humans who reached Europe, known as Homo antecessor, after the Latin word for pioneer or explorer.

Homo antecessor, who lived before Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens, probably came to the caves of Atapuerca after a long migration from Africa and through the Middle East, northern Italy and France. It is a particularly good site for human settlement, at the confluence of two rivers with a comfortable climate and rich in fauna and flora, de Castro said.

They found water and food in abundance, could hunt wild boar, horses, deer, "which means that they did not practice cannibalism

through a lack of food. They killed their rivals and used the meat," he said.

"We have also discovered two levels that contain cannibalized remains, which means that it was not a one-off thing, but continued through time," he said.

"Another interesting aspect is that most of the 11 individuals that we have identified were children or adolescents."

"We think that there are also two young adults including a female, which indicates that they killed the base of the demographic pyramid of the group."

Atapuerca, situated on the edge of Eurasia, allowed Homo antecessor to develop in an isolated and more distinct way, with characteristics that were both archaic and modern.

In addition to hunting, they also made tools.

The area at the time was heavily forested, with oaks, chestnut trees and juniper, and abundant with bears, lynxes, panthers, foxes and hyenas.



This skull, named Miguelon, estimated to be 400,000 years old, is among one of many found at the Atapuerca archaeological site in northern Spain. PHOTO: AFP