

# “Making Canadian Music in Spanish”: Cuban-Canadian Songwriter Alex Cuba

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Alex Cuba is the stage name for Alexis Puentes, a Cuban-born singer-songwriter who immigrated to Victoria, British Columbia, in 1999. Alex first became known on Canadian folk and world music circuits for the Cuban salsa music of the Puentes Brothers, a band he formed with his brother Adonis soon after moving to Canada. Within a few years, he launched a solo singer-songwriter career. In 2009, I saw his trio at a festival in Smithers, northern BC, his newly adopted hometown. I was struck by his transformation from specifically Cuban styles to a broad approach that draws on a number of Latin and Caribbean musics. Despite his name change to “Cuba”, Alex’s biography celebrates his cosmopolitan attitude and his avoidance of stereotypical notions of Cuban-ness: “His trademark sugarcane-sweet melodies, pop soul hooks and rock chords subtly subvert commonly held notions of what Cuban music is ... Not tied to tradition, this Cuban-Canadian prefers his vintage Gibson over *el sencerro* (cowbell) anytime.” ([www.alexcuba.com/bio/](http://www.alexcuba.com/bio/))

The son of a music instructor, Alex learned guitar, *tres* (a six-stringed lute), percussion, and bass at an early age, and played primarily Cuban music until the age of 11. At that point, he heard Michael Jackson for the first time, and subsequently became fascinated with American pop music and jazz (“ExploreMusic chats with Alex Cuba”, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTgHgdLHWak&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTgHgdLHWak&feature=related)). The influence of soul and funk, Brazilian *tropicalia*, Cuban *nueva trova*, and reggae are evident in his music. His songs are primarily in Spanish; however, he performs for both Latin and Anglo audiences, a fact evident in his winning both a Latin Grammy and two Juno awards. Despite his large Anglo following, his lyrics, containing themes of desire, love, and peace, contain word-play and poetic devices that do not translate directly into English. Nonetheless, when performing live he invites participation, and audiences often sing along to his memorable choruses.

AH: You were born in Artemisa, Cuba, and now you live in Smithers, Northern British Columbia. What brought you to live there?

AC: Love and family.

AH: Has living in British Columbia, and in particular Smithers, affected your songwriting? If so, how?

AC: I think living in this part of the country allows me to really focus in my art. It might be because of

how beautiful and peaceful this place really is. AH: Is there anything you think of as Canadian about your music?

AC: Yes, of course. And actually Billy Bryans that just passed away (God bless his soul) was the first one to ever say something like that. He told me once, “You are making Canadian music in Spanish.” And I think so, because my music is a picture of where I am at the moment in my life. And since I live here, there is a lot of Canada in it.

AH: How would you describe your current relationship to the Cuban music you grew up playing?

AC: I think there is something that I can't ever erase from my soul. And that is the fact that I was born and raised in Cuba. But my music, the one that I've built with my own two hands after 13 years, has taken me all the way to create something else. As I like to say, the perfect fusion between [a] mango seed and an apple seed. That makes a tree that grows in both countries. Cuba and Canada.

AH: How do you know when you have written a good song? What is a good Alex Cuba song and why?

AC: You get a funny feeling when you write a good song. It makes you excited. So I play it over and over again without getting tired of it. That's when I know I've written a great tune. Also very important for me is when the song transcends the language barrier, making people feel something without understanding what the song is saying. I think my song “Si Pero No” is one of those.

AH: Can you describe the types of audiences that come to your shows?

AC: People from all kinds of backgrounds and nationalities.

AH: In your bio it says that your songs cut through linguistic and cultural barriers. When so many of your songs are in Spanish, how do you try and overcome these barriers for non-Spanish speaking audiences?

AC: I don't try at all. It just happens on its own. Making me realized that when [a] song is good it goes far no matter what.

Please visit Alex’s website at: [www.alexcuba.com](http://www.alexcuba.com). Andy Hillhouse is a Ph.D. Candidate in ethnomusicology at the University of Toronto.