Article

Street Rhythms and the Revolution
On the Meanings and Melodies of Cuba’s Ambulant Vendors

Ståle Wig
University of Oslo

Abstract
Cuban street vendors use pregones, high-pitched rhymes and rhythms, to promote their goods and services. This ambulant form of small-scale commerce has been part of the urban soundscape since the early years of Spanish colonization. While often celebrated as a vibrant addition to the nation’s identity, the pregón has sometimes been regarded as a nuisance that must conform to the regulations and preferences of elites or stay silent. This paper explores the shifting circumstances under which street vendors have operated in Cuba, specifically since the 1959 Revolution. The drive to establish communism on the island during the 1960s resulted in the partial decline of street traders and their tunes. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s brought about social conditions that led to their resurgence in a new form. Presently, Cuban street vendors confront an expanding legal framework aimed at regulating their activities, as well as popular critique that their sales jingles lack musical creativity. Nevertheless, the musical-commercial expressions of Cuba’s ambulant vendors persist. They continuously adapt to their social circumstances, finding new ways to draw attention to their goods and services.

Keywords
affect, Cuba, music, street-vendor songs

Introduction
On any given day in Cuba, the voices of street sellers ring out in streets and squares, blending with neighborhood chatter, reggaeton hits, coughing cars, barking dogs, or the sounds of the telenovela, the soap opera, resonating from open windows in the evening. Known as pregoneros, these street vendors use rhymes and rhythms, pregones, to draw attention to their goods and services. Bread sellers announce their arrival in the neighborhood by combining whistles and by pressing their vocal cords to the nasally extreme, producing sounds that pierce through the humming of everyday life – ‘panadero-panadero-ooo.’ Retail vendors entice customers with cries about chlorine or cleaning brooms – ‘el buen cloro00’, ‘hay escoba-escoba-aaa’ – calling for
attention by pronouncing the last vocals in a loud and pitched-up voice. Upon hearing these calls, interested residents leave their homes or lower baskets from their balconies to purchase. Some sellers turn to more elaborate melodic structures to attract attention. During my ethnographic fieldwork in Havana between 2015 and 2017, as well as shorter visits until 2023, I recorded some of them. I did ethnographic participant observation among Cuban small businesses, located in a retail market in Old Havana. As part of my research at marketplaces and in surrounding streets (Wig 2020), I embedded myself with ambulant street vendors, accompanying them on their journeys through the neighborhood while recording their musical-commercial calls. Ramón, a peanut seller working in the bustling Parque de la Fraternidad, a transport hub, had developed his own pregón to attract customers. He declared to the pedestrians waiting for the bus: ‘está sabrooso el maní, no digo yo, dice la gente por ahí’ (roughly translated: ‘the peanuts are delicious, don’t take it from me, it’s what folks over there are saying’). The jingle stood out from chatter and traffic noise in the park not only because of its content, which rhymes in Spanish, but also because of its catchy, melodic rhythm. Similarly, at the indoor retail market nearby, pastry seller Yadira marked her entrance by proclaiming different words used for the same kind of honey cookie, local names drawn from provinces across the island (hay keke-eee – panque, queroa, paniqueke, 24 horas – hay keke-eee). Historians and folklorists have hailed these expressions as constitutive of Cuban identity, giving flavor to the national project (Díaz-Ayala 1988; Chacón 2021; Esquenazi 1993; Porta 2006). In the words of Miguel Barnet, a prominent Cuban folklorist and intellectual, the pregón is ‘an integral element of our cultural terrain’ (Barnet 1963). Indeed, the connection with the populace, el pueblo, is part of the appeal of the pregoneros, who often seek to influence the moods of their listeners by making people laugh, smile, or otherwise feel like they are faced with someone with intimate access to their shared cultural references – someone, for instance, who knows the provincial variants to describe the Cuban honey cake.

These musical-commercial street calls not only characterize everyday life in Cuba but also, to varying degrees, the soundscape of cities across Latin America. The phenomenon is rooted in shared histories of European colonization, economic marginalization, and rural-to-urban migration (Rasmussen 2017; Hansen et al. 2014). Ambulant vendors across regions cater to residents and pedestrians by enunciating melodies that stand out for two reasons. First, their melodic, catchy, and repetitive chimes capture attention. Second, the content of the rhymes often charms listeners. As Lyssett Pérez, a profiled pregonera selling peanuts in Old Havana, explained to a journalist, ‘[With] the pregón, I’m making you fall in love so that you buy [my product], are entertained … and don’t forget me’ (AFP 2013). A pregón goes beyond conveying information to customers; it is an auditory experience that can

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1 I have anonymized interlocutors to protect their identity. An exception is made for Lyssett Pérez, the Havana-based pregonera whose quotes I include below, drawn from an interview with a foreign journalist (AFP 2013). All translations from Spanish are my own.
linger in people’s memories. But unlike songs or melodies that people feel are ‘stuck’ in their brain, leading them to hum compulsorily (Halpern and Bartlett 2011), the jingle of a successful pregónero is not so much reproduced involuntarily as it can be remembered and reproduced upon request. Cuban historians have interviewed elderly residents who can recite pregones from their upbringing with precision. As an 87-year-old man in Villa Clara put it, a successful pregón is a penetrating sound that ‘enters people’s ears and is impossible to forget’ (Porta 2006, 13).

If the practice of the pregón is a means of creating affective impact by mastering rhymes and rhythms, shaping the public in the process, this form of street-level commerce has itself been influenced by political forces. As I will describe, the practice of the Cuban pregoneros has been subject to state regulation and intervention to different degrees throughout history, as well as to shifting popular conceptions. The revolutionary clamp-down on private business in Cuba during the 1960s nearly extinguished the practice, while the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 gave reverberations that rekindled it in a new form. Currently, digital technologies and new state regulations are once again reshaping street commerce on the island. Thus, the social phenomenon of the pregón, which encompasses the rhymes and rhythms that give shape and flavor to everyday urban life, is conditioned by a shifting socio-political environment as well as digital transformations. This article contributes to social history and ethnomusicology by investigating the changing conditions under which commercial street criers have operated since Cuba’s 1959 Revolution, with specific focus on the affective appeal and political regulation of these everyday urban rhythms.

The pregón merits attention precisely because it is an omnipresent aspect of life in Cuba, a background sound that confirms people’s common sociality, what Michael Herzfeld describes as the content of ‘cultural intimacy’ (Herzfeld 1997). Cultural intimacy refers to those aspects of cultural identity that, although they may be considered externally peculiar or embarrassing, ‘nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality’ (Herzfeld 1997, 3). Serving as a means for economically marginalized populations to assert their presence in public, the pregón implicitly appeals to a shared sense of sociality with listeners. It is held up as an expression of ‘Cuban-ness’ as much by ordinary residents as cultural elites and state officials, whose policies have formed the opportunities for the pregoneros.

My inquiry centers on the cultural intimacy between pregoneros and their listeners, and the historical, political, and economic conditions that shape this relationship. I draw inspiration from empirical research into the local conditions under which citizens and governing powers know and regulate, sense, and make sense of sound (e.g., Cardoso 2018, Feld 1996, Schwartz 2004, Sterne 2012), including the theoretical work of Henri Lefebvre regarding the production of public space (Lefebvre 1968; 1992). Lefebvre urged scholars to examine the exercises of power that control and regulate space by permitting certain actions while limiting or prescribing others (Lefebvre 1992, 341; Zieleniec 2018, 7). Whose sounds are deemed acceptable? Whose rhythmic schedule governs their expression? What regulations must they adhere to? How do Cuban street vendors assert their ‘right to
the city’ (Lefebvre 1968)? Answers to these questions have evolved over time. I combine my own archival and ethnographic research with insights from Cuban historians and recent ethnographic research (notably Molina 2020a, 2020b) to trace how the interplay between ‘the affective, the aural, and the political’ (Hofman 2015, 160) has shaped the practices and perceptions of the Cuban pregón.

In what follows, I examine the persistence of Cuban pregóneros amid shifting historical conditions from the early colonial period to the post-1959 Revolution era and its subsequent decades. The street vendors’ proclamations have been celebrated as vibrant contributions to national identity but have also been seen as a nuisance that must either conform to the preferences and regulations of the powerful or remain silent. Their struggles thus reflect broader social dynamics in Cuba concerning the meanings and values associated with how people use public space in everyday life.

**Street Rhythms as a Measure of History**

During the colonization of Cuba in the sixteenth century, the practice of drawing attention to commercial products and services through public proclamation was well-established in Spain and the wider Mediterranean region (Díaz-Ayala 1988, 29; Biddle 2019; Pérez-Salazar 2016). This custom migrated to Cuba in the early decades of colonization. However, it was not just commercial actors who proclaimed in public during that time. Historians suggest that the first pregón to be heard in Cuban streets was possibly in May 1523, on the day when the Spanish monarch Carlos V demanded the news to be spread that Diego Velázquez, the island’s first colonizer, had been dismissed as governor (Chacón 2021). Representatives of the Spanish crown blew a trumpet in a plaza in Santiago, the island’s first capital, cutting through the hum of everyday life to capture people’s attention before making the announcement. While the practice of announcing state messages in this way declined with the spread of the printing press, radio, and other means of mass communication, the commercial pregón persisted through the voices of street sellers for centuries to come.

Under Spanish colonial rule, visiting sailors, merchants, and runaway slaves traded goods in the ports of Havana and Santiago. In marketplaces, sellers drew on melodies and jingles to draw attention to their wares. Vendors would also roam the city offering a range of items, from home-made candy to hardware, artisanal products, and maintenance services and repair. These ambulant vendors established links not only between the island’s port cities and foreign lands, but also between urban areas and the countryside. Pregoneros brought agricultural products to members of the urban middle classes who had no time to go to the market. As ambulant intermediaries, they travelled through neighborhoods with trolleys filled with fruit and vegetables, pronouncing songs and rhymes to entice customers.

Studies by Cuban historians and folklorist, most notably Cristobal Díaz-Ayala (1988), testify to the artistic value of these expressions, highlighting the poetic
qualities of their melodies. In what some historians have called the golden age of the *pregón*, from the mid-1800s to early 1900s, vendors often based their musical-commercial declarations on tunes or popular genres such as *son* and *guaracha* (Barnet 1963; Barnet 1988; Esquenazi 1993). As a testament to the quality and appeal of these street-jingles, certain *pregones* ended up providing inspiration to professional musicians who drew on their inventiveness to compose songs. Among the celebrated examples are Félix B. Caignet’s ‘Frutas del Caney,’ Ernesto Lecuona’s ‘El Frutero,’ and ‘El Manicero’ by Moisés Simón Rodríguez, a song which in the 1930s became widely known in the United States through its appearance in a Hollywood movie production (for an encyclopedic overview, see Díaz-Ayala 1988). Notably, these well-known examples are by white musicians trained in ‘Western’ music, who appropriated or borrowed *pregones*, turning them into popular songs, sometimes with little or no recognition of the original source.

However, the relationship between street vending *pregoneros* and popular trends in music goes both ways. Ambulant vendors in Cuba have always incorporated popular music genres into their rhythms and jingles. Still today, this cultural adaptability is key to understanding their persistence. Cuban street sellers mediate between different segments of society. As commercial intermediaries, *pregoneros* establish connections between the city and countryside, and between producers, importers, and consumers. With their melodic sales techniques, they also aim to establish an affective connection with customers, expressions that resonate with their listeners much like other forms of impactful music (Turino 1993). Consequently, we can interpret their rhymes and rhythms as a glimpse into concerns and dynamics of everyday life, as living reflections of history. What story can we uncover by listening to the *pregoneros* of Cuba today?

**Stories ofDecline**

The prevailing narrative in the research literature on Cuban *pregoneros* suggests a decline and eventual disappearance of this cultural tradition. Echoing a well-known concern among Cuban folklorists, historian Marta Esquenazi argued in the early 1990s that the *pregón* was undergoing an ‘extinction process’ (Esquenazi 1993, 138). Researchers have concurred that the *pregón*, once a vibrant and rich commercial-musical tradition, is now on the verge of vanishing (Díaz-Ayala 1988, 16; Porta 2006). According to these accounts, this looming extinction is registered in the urban soundscape as contemporary *pregones* show less musical richness and complexity compared to earlier times. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *pregoneros* were characterized by their melodic and musical quality. However, the standard narrative suggests that the calls of contemporary street vendors have become formulaic repetitions or mere whispers from black-market traders selling contraband items.

Like other researchers studying this phenomenon (Molina 2020a), I was struck by the prevalence of the narrative of decline in the local discourse about the *pregoneros*. Not only professional musicologists but also my Cuban friends and interlocutors...
expressed a sense that vendors of the past sang better, and that today’s pregón lacked artistry. Their concern was that monotonous and uninspired pregones seemed to replace the beautiful and unique songs of the past. Understanding this reasoning is easy. During my research affiliation with the Juan Marinello Cultural Center in Havana in 2016, I gained access to a vast archive of earlier pregones, collected by a group of researchers in the 1980s for an ‘Ethnographic Atlas’ of Cuba (CIDCC Juan Marinello/Centro de antropología 1999). As I revisited the archive of melodies and rhymes, I too noticed the apparent contrast between the calls of contemporary street vendors and the melodies of the past. One pregón, recorded in Old Havana in July 1983, went as follows:

*El gato de María Ramos*
*Un paquete me robó*
*Rom-Pi-Ño*
*Así gritaba ese gato*
*del palo que yo le di*

¡Maní tostatado!
garapiñado
*a centavo el paquete*
y ya me voy!

Maria Ramos’s cat
stole a package from me
Rom-Pi-Ño
That’s how that cat yelled
after I beat it with a stick

Roasted peanuts,
pralines,
A penny the package
[Get it now ‘cause] Now I’m leaving!

Anyone listening to the soundscape of an urban neighborhood in Cuba today is unlikely to encounter such lyrics. If pregones can be organized along a continuum between song and speech (Feld and Fox 1994), contemporary expressions seem to lie closer to the spoken language. As ethnomusicologist Andrés Molina observes, Cuban street vendors increasingly seem to enunciate their wares ‘almost in a recitational style, prolonging certain vowels and keeping melodic elaboration to a minimum’ (Molina 2020a, 139). Their focus seems to be to reach as many listeners as possible rather than other aesthetic considerations. Repetitious calls declare that vendors are passing through selling ‘peanuts, peanuts, peanuts,’ or ‘ice cream, ice
cream, ice cream.’ As one Cuban literary website put it: ‘Surely the last generations of Cubans have not known as many or as ingenious pregones as their parents or grandparents’ (El Estornudo 2020). Writer and lyricist Alexis Díaz-Pimienta (2023) laments this development in a poem published online in February 2023:

Eso sí, ya los pregones
no son nada musicales.
Invaden nuestros portales
con infames grabaciones.
Son vendedores gritones
Más que buenos pregoneros.

[Like] that, yes, the pregones
are no longer musical.
They invade our doorways
with infamous recordings.
They are loud salesmen
More than good pregoneros.

Before addressing the possible reasons for this development, it is important, first, to reflect for a moment on its underlying premise. The prevailing understanding of the pregón as a vanishing phenomenon is revealing not only for what it tells us about the past. It also indicates how Cubans interpret and comment upon the present. The tendency among both researchers and non-academics to understand the pregón as a fading phenomenon can be seen as an expression of nostalgia for a simpler past, for example, before the collapse of Cuba’s trading partner the Soviet Union, in contrast with the present situation, which for many is marked by economic struggle and hustle. In Molina’s words, many Cubans see the current and allegedly less musical sounds of vendors as part of ‘moment of discontent exacerbated by growing scarcity and precarity in the island’ (Molina 2020a, 230).

Moreover, the notion that vendors of the past were more musical than today relies on a basis that is hard to prove. Although the historical jingles and melodies recorded by musicologists do indeed seem melodically complex in comparison with monotonous calls of the present, it is possible that researchers documenting Cuban folklore in all its richness would tend to record the more elaborate pregones, which stand out in people’s memory in comparison with simpler, repetitive jingles which possibly always existed alongside them. Notwithstanding these epistemological reservations, it is hard to overlook the general tendency, as indicated by musicologists and historians, that the expressions of pregoneros have indeed shifted in recent decades. Without assuming a romanticized notion of the past, how can we best understand the changing melodies of Cuban street commerce?
The Push for Communism

The most notable shift affecting commercial street vendors in the twentieth century was the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Conspicuously, however, the first authoritative Cuban studies of the pregones made no explicit mention of the effects of the Revolution on their practice (Barnet 1963; Díaz-Ayala 1988). Rather than discuss the shifting status of ambulant sellers in the 1960s and 70s, influential accounts highlighted pre-revolutionary street traditions and songs as examples of the bad old days of pre-revolutionary society. According to Miguel Barnet, the call of the pregonero was the sound of ‘the anguish of the man who has had to survive hunger and the injustice of capitalist regimes’ (Barnet 1988, 104). In other words, the ubiquitous presence of street-sellers and their songs in the first half of the 1900s had to be understood as an expression of a time when Cubans were forced to go out on the streets to gain sustenance by their own means, ‘when the state was unable to alleviate the hunger of the humble, when unemployment was the norm’ (Barnet 1988, 102).

While this may be an accurate understanding of the social causes of street vending in pre-revolutionary Cuba, the silence about the fate of the pregones in the post-revolutionary years speaks volumes. To the extent that the political and cultural leadership promoted Cuban folkloristic music and street traditions in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, it was often to highlight musical folk traditions as symbols of the nation and sources of pride to unify people in support of the Revolution (Moore 2006, 170-196). News or insights about detrimental effects of revolutionary policies was rarely heard in official discourse. It is only with more recent scholarship that some consensus has emerged concerning the impact of the Cuban Revolution on the practice of the pregones. In the words of Villa Clara historian Ramiro Porta, ‘In the first sixty years of the 1900s, countless pregones were heard hawking. In their almost endless walks, they reached the most remote places. But starting in the 1960s, with the establishment of a new form of production that prohibits private sales in the street, the pregones disappeared’ (Porta 2006, 9). Similarly, historian Edilinda Chacón notes that the push to establish communism in Cuba in the 1960s evidently came ‘at the cost of the disappearance of the ambulant vendors, and with them the pregones and the pregón’ (Chacón 2021).

The historical process to which these Cuban scholars refer is the government’s attempt, after the overthrow of power in 1959, to establish communism during the first decade of the Cuban Revolution. This vast initiative included the nationalization of large private enterprises in the early 1960s, culminating in the so-called Revolutionary Offensive of 1968, in which all remaining small businesses on the island were nationalized, from rum-factories and sugar production down to bars, corner-stores, and the operations of individual street vendors (Eckstein 1994). The overarching idea of La Ofensiva Revolucionaria was to employ all the country’s workforce in the state sector; that is, not only in state hospitals and schools, but also in state restaurants, state transport, and state outlets for food and retail. A communist society where people’s needs would be met through socialist distribution had no place for intermediary commerce. On the eve of the Revolutionary
Offensive, the highest rungs of Cuban leadership explicitly vilified the figure of the commercial intermediary. In a speech on the stairs of the University of Havana in March 1968, Fidel Castro announced that ‘there will be no future in this nation for private business, the self-employed, private industry, or anything.’ Castro warned that one could not ‘create socialist consciousness, much less a communist consciousness, with the mentality of shopkeepers.’ Contrasting ‘parasitic’ or ‘lumpen’ merchants, party officials placed their faith in proletarians as the protagonists of the future (Castro 1968). Cuba’s workers ought to adhere to Che Guevara’s ([1965] 2003) notion of The New Man, El Hombre Nuevo: a selfless, socially responsible citizen who produced and sacrificed for the greater good, without concern for financial profit (Hynson 2020, 201-256).

In the 1970s and 80s, notable Cuban intellectuals, including Miguel Barnet (Barnet [1978] 1988) and scholars affiliated with the Juan Marinello Cultural Center, increasingly began promoting and studying the traditions of the pregones. Their interest can be seen as an attempt to understand a form of cultural expression that had long characterized everyday street rhythms but did not align well with the 1960s attempt to establish Soviet-style communism in Cuba. During this period, state policy and academic funding shifted focus to promote extensive studies of provincial and rural ‘folk traditions’ (Gobin and Morel 2013, 4; Moore 2006, 170-196). One ambitious project of this time was the production of the above-mentioned ‘Ethnographic Atlas’ in the 1980s, which aimed to document folk customs, including the melodies of street vendors. Simultaneously, the first ‘Festival of the Pregón’ was launched in 1983 (Millet and Brea 1989, quoted in Moore 2006, 297).

Such initiatives sought to elevate the pregónero as an official source of national pride, a source of cultural intimacy appropriated by the state. The pregónero, portrayed as humble yet charming, materially poor yet resourceful, became the bearer of a ‘disappearing’ tradition that state-sponsored festivals and academics sought to document and revitalize. However, as ambulant vendors increasingly took to Cuban streets in the 1990s, their calls and melodies no longer aligned with the image of the pregón as it had been established through state-promotion, academic scholarship, and popular memory.

The Fall of the Soviet Union and the Rise of Street Vending
In the early 1990s, it became evident that ambulant street sellers and their melodic calls had not disappeared from Cuba as previously thought. One contributing factor was the shifting economic policy landscape. The push for communism and economic nationalization that culminated in the Revolutionary Offensive had been transformative, but it receded during the 1970s and early 1980s. In the agricultural sector, collectivization failed to yield the expected harvests envisioned by the Cuban leadership. Notably, Fidel Castro’s goal of a ‘10 million ton’ sugar harvest remained unrealized. Consequently, the leadership sought to enhance the productive capacity of the peasant sector by establishing agricultural markets, known as Mercados Libres Campesinos (Rosenberg 1992), where small-scale producers could sell their goods at
their own prices. Additionally, the government allowed for some private self-employment, including street vending (Mesa-Lago 1993, 134). In the new agricultural markets of the 1980s, individual peasants were once again permitted to sell and declare their agricultural products.

While this legal shift opened new opportunities for commercial intermediaries, including for the *pregoneros*, the notion that they had ever completely ‘disappeared’ is questionable. Ethnographic accounts of everyday life in Cuba during the 1980s suggest that ambulant street vendors maintained a presence throughout the island also prior to these political shifts. Informal intermediaries traded agricultural products and retail goods, irrespective of whether such activities were considered ‘legal’ by the government. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 1988, Mona Rosendahl writes about the thriving informal trade in retail that Cubans who were connected to the tourist economy could acquire and later resell in local neighborhoods at inflated prices (Rosendahl 1997, 40). While this type of trade simmered also throughout the 1980s, a deeper political-economic shift was brewing at the turn of the decade.

For more than twenty years following the Revolutionary Offensive in 1968, the Cuban government had relied on a close trade relationship with the Soviet Union to sustain the notion that it could provide employment for all working-age citizens and eliminate the need for commercial intermediaries. The Soviets had purchased Cuban sugar and other exports, offering advantageous agreements that supplied the state with income and access to markets, bypassing the US trade embargo against the island. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc in 1991 therefore had dramatic repercussions on Cuba’s economy, marking the onset of what Fidel Castro euphemistically termed ‘The Special Period in the Time of Peace’ (Hernández-Reguante 2009). Within a few months, Cuban export revenues dwindled, and state coffers dried up. Imports grew scarce, as did fuel and electricity (Mesa-Lago 1993). Millions of citizens found themselves in dire economic circumstances. This shift reverberated in the sights and sounds of Cuba’s neighborhoods. As the state distribution system faltered, informal trading spilled onto the streets. With little available in state supermarkets and ration stores, Cubans ventured into the island’s burgeoning black-market trade to survive. Gradually, the conditions returned which Miguel Barnet argued had led *pregoneros* into the streets in pre-revolutionary Cuba – a situation in which ‘people had the need to go out to the streets to gain sustenance by their own means, when the state was unable to alleviate the hunger of the humble’ (Barnet 1988, 102). The 1990s saw a boom in the informal economy, with street vendors traversing neighborhoods carrying a wide range of goods including kitchen utensils, toys, hamburgers, canned food, medicines, or anything else they could get their hands on to make a living. Among my interlocutors in Havana’s retail markets, veterans recalled how they had started their commercial working lives as informal street sellers during the ‘Special Period.’ They told stories of sourcing products through informal importers, stores accessible only to tourists, or by pilfering from state-run establishments and warehouses.
However, the sounds of Cuban street sellers in the 1990s did not conform to the established folklore image of the *pregonero*. Instead of ‘singing,’ these commercial intermediaries were often heard reciting monotonous rhythms or even whispering what they had to offer. Elderly residents referred to their calls as ‘inaudible.’ As historian Ramiro Porta writes, with the onset of the so-called Special Period, ‘street vendors reappeared in neighborhoods, boulevards, rural areas, and towns: most of them fast, elusive, tax transgressors, fearful of losing their merchandise or being targeted’ (Portas 2006, 10). As hinted in this account, the change in melodic expression can be attributed to the nature of the contraband goods carried by ambulant vendors. In the past, a traveling fruit vendor would proudly sing about the countryside’s products. However, a *pregonero* selling stolen cans of meat or medicines from a state warehouse in the 1990s would be less inclined to create intricate rhymes and rhythms. Molina similarly shares the recollections of Cubans who nostalgically remember a time when vendors would vocally announce their offerings without inhibition, rather than whispering their illicit offers (Molina 2020a, 234). It is plausible, then, that the shift in musical expression is connected to the vendors’ transition into informality and illegality – their ‘silence’ and new expressions being audible signs of prohibition.

Many within the new generation of *pregoneros* found themselves in a legally precarious position not only due to the nature of their merchandise but also because of their migratory status. The economic crisis of the 1990s resulted in an unprecedented wave of migration to Havana and other urban centers. In response to the influx of rural Cubans moving to the capital, many of them to sell in the streets, authorities implemented a prohibition on internal migration to Havana in 1997. This extraordinary measure was deemed necessary to alleviate overcrowding and address issues of ‘social indiscipline’ (Bodenheimer 2015, 35–36; de la Fuente 2001, 328). Despite the prohibition, rural migrants continued to flock to the capital city, where more money circulated, and greater economic opportunities awaited. Consequently, many of the vendors who emerged on urban streets in the 1990s not only violated regulations regarding their illicit trade but also frequently flouted laws prohibiting internal migration. It is no surprise, then, that the figure of the jovial musical-commercial intermediaries of yesteryears seemed long gone. These intermediaries were often internal migrants from the eastern provinces, compelled by sheer necessity to seek a livelihood in the city through the sale of contraband items.

**Legalization and the Dawn of the Internet**

As we have seen so far, the *pregoneros* have remained a presence in Cuba’s post-revolutionary period, albeit with varying degrees and diverse expressions. Contrary to concerns of their imminent ‘extinction’ or their days being ‘numbered’ (Esquenazi 1993, 138; Díaz-Ayala 1988, 16) ambulant vendors have developed their melodies and sales practices amidst shifts in the country’s political economy, from the push to establish communism in the early years of the Revolution, to the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. In more recent years, the most significant
political development impacting the pregones has been the so-called ‘update’ of country’s socialist economic model initiated by Raúl Castro, Fidel Castro’s brother, in the 2010s. In a speech to lawmakers, the younger Castro launched a comprehensive reform program aimed at addressing the informality of the ‘submerged black market’ that had emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Castro 2010). As part of these reforms, street vending was brought under more specified formal regulation. An official decree created new job categories in which ambulant sellers could register: ‘ambulatory vendor of agricultural products’ and ‘ambulatory vendor of food and non-alcoholic beverages’ (Gaceta Oficial 2013a; 2013b). These licenses for street sales were two among a growing number of occupations available for small-scale private business (Ritter and Henken 2015).

On the surface, these measures appeared to constitute a form of market ‘liberalization,’ a freeing up of regulatory ties. International media celebrated the fact that citizens were now allowed to trade on the streets, as ‘Cuba’s little capitalists’ got ‘ready to rumba’ (Franks 2012). However, as I began my fieldwork in retail markets and among ambulant traders in Havana in 2015, it was evident that the legalization involved official protocols that many struggled to comply with. For one, the ban on internal migration to Havana remained in effect, preventing many vendors from acquiring self-employment licenses in the first place. If they were caught selling by state-employed inspectors, vendors were often rounded up and expelled back to the provinces. Secondly, any street vendor faced the potential dilemma that while the sale of agricultural products was legalized, the government did not provide self-employment licenses for many of the goods that customers demanded, such as household products, imported clothes and shoes, or other black-market retail items. Much like other forms of small-scale businesses in Cuba (Henken 2002), ambulant vendors were ‘condemned to informality,’ because to make a living, it was hard to refrain from bending or breaking the law. Today, despite the looming threat of getting caught and fined by inspectors, contemporary ambulant vendors persist in their practice by adapting and reinventing their pregones, sometimes drawing on contemporary influences to express themselves.

During my fieldwork among retail markets in Old Havana, I occasionally accompanied Julio, a street vendor who was known in the neighborhood simply as ‘Rai-fai’ because of his humorous pregón. Julio told me the story behind his nickname and jingle. He had once heard an English advertisement for chewing gum on TV, a brand called ‘Rainfire’ with the flavor ‘fresh menthol.’ Sensing the affective potential of this advertising, Julio created his own sales tune as he walked down the street. Whenever residents heard Julio rapping his jingle with machine-gun pace – ‘Rai-fai-wita-fresh-mentato’ – they knew who was coming to sell chewing gum, five pesos a pop. Once again, the affective appeal of the pregón was both culturally humorous and melodically catchy.

Unlike Julio and pregones with more elaborate performances, many of today’s commercial street cries remain monotonous and repetitive. This is often intentional, as sellers rely on digital recordings and speakers instead of their own voices. In Havana, the most well-known example of such pre-recorded pregones is the jingle
used by vendors to advertise ice cream sandwiches. All throughout the city, residents can hear a monotonous male voice repeatedly proclaiming, ‘El bocadito de helado. El bocadito de helado.’ Ambulant vendors share these recordings with each other via cellphones, resulting in the signature jingle being heard in the exact same form from the speakers mounted on sales bikes. In the above-mentioned poem about contemporary pregones, writer Díaz-Pimienta expressed his dissatisfaction with ‘El bocadito de helado,’ a monotonous and ‘metallic’ sound (Díaz-Pimienta 2023). Addressing the figure of the contemporary pregonero directly in a verse, Díaz-Pimienta adds: ‘Dude, if you don’t educate yourself ... you will win the prize for the most boring pregon ever produced’ (‘Asere, si no te educas ... ganarás el Premio Lucas, al pregon más aburrido’) (Díaz-Pimienta 2023).

The relationship between digital technologies and the social phenomenon of the pregon is more intricate than implied by such common complaints. With improved access to the internet and smartphones on the island in the late 2010s, Cubans began recording ambulant vendors passing through the city. On platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, numerous videos started showcasing contemporary pregones. Thus, while cellphone recording devices have contributed to mechanical repetitions and musical monotony among pregoneros, these digital technologies have also inadvertently provided a lens on the broader phenomenon, highlighting the richness in musical expression among contemporary ambulant vendors.

A recent pregon that surfaced due to an unplanned cellphone recording is by Gilberto Gonzalez, a man who raps about his goods to the beat of reggaeton, blending reggae and electronic rhythms. In the video captured by a passer-by and later viewed tens of thousands of times on YouTube, Gonzalez is seen strolling down the street carrying a pack of toilet paper above his head, singing, ‘Toilet paper, so the chorus goes, buy [from] me, my people, to clean your bottom, hands in the air! I say it daily, at fifty pesos for toilet paper!’ (¡Papel sanitario, dice el estribillo, cómprenme mi gente, limpiense el fondillo. ¡Mano pa’ arriba lo digo a diario, a cincuenta pesos el papel sanitario!). The recording gained appeal not just because of Gonzalez’s spirited rap performance but also due to his reference to an experience shared by most Cubans: the regular shortage of toilet paper (Diario de Cuba 2018).

The success of this street jingle spread further thanks to one of Cuba’s top DJs at the time, DJ Unic, who invited the Gonzalez to his studio to remix the call into a song released online. Both Gonzalez’s viral video clip and the song garnered attention in international news media (Gutierrez and Marsh 2018). Nearly a century after the first pregones made it into the popular songs of the 1920s and 1930s (Diaz-Ayala 1986), this transformation of a modern-day pregon into a reggaeton tune on YouTube serves as a reminder that, much as in earlier decades, this social phenomenon has not only survived but can amplify its appeal by drawing on contemporary styles, references, and techniques.

One afternoon in late 2018, I discussed Gonzalez’s viral video with an interlocutor. Norberto, an elderly shoe seller in Centro Habana, compared the present-day reggaeton melody with a pregon he remembered from his childhood in Santiago in
the early 1990s. Every week, a man would traverse the neighborhood next to the railway lines, carrying stacks of old newspapers. The *pregonero* called out the names of the official party newspapers he was carrying – ‘I’m selling *Joventud* and *Granma!*’, followed by the sentence, ‘[use it] for whatever suits you!’ (*para lo que te acomode*). Like the successful *pregones* of today, this street call gained appeal by hinting at a shared set of references, in this case, concerning official Cuban newspapers that could best serve as toilet paper.

While the musical-commercial calls of yesteryears share much with today’s *pregones*, one important difference is the presence of digital technology, which amplifies the calls of the most creative street sellers. The rise of social media and digital technologies has furthered the voice and knowledge of *pregoneros*, with some even launching their own YouTube channels featuring regular clips and interviews. One of them is Osmany Fonseca, who goes by the nickname of *Papito El Caramelero*. For years, Fonseca was a well-known and cherished presence in parts of Central and Old Havana, but he became known to a wider public because a passenger on a bus recorded one of his improvised *pregones*, and later uploaded the clip to YouTube, accumulating over 150,000 views (Diario de Cuba 2020), as well as later editions on Facebook and TikTok.

Like other ambulant vendors, Fonseca often faces scrutiny from inspectors due to his bending of official sales regulations. In the clip, Fonseca incorporates this reality creatively into his *pregón*: ‘Chocolate flavored candies,’ he sings, ‘Driver, is this the bus for the broke [people]?’ (*Caramelos de sabor a cacao. ¿Chofer, esta es la Guagua de los arrancaos?*). Passengers respond with laughter. As Fonseca notices the person recording his performance with a cellphone, he invents a new rhyme on the spot, creating roars of laughter inside the bus. ‘Candies from San Fernando. Buddy, are you recording me? Candies from Panama. Whatever, I’m not selling anything! … Flavored candies. They told me there were no inspectors here!’ (*Caramelos de San Fernand. ¿Compañero usted me está grabando? Caramelos de Panamá. ¡Cualquier cosa, yo no estoy vendiendo na!’ … Caramelos de sabores, Que aquí no había inspectores.)

Thousands of ‘likes,’ emojis, and comments can be found below the recordings of Fonseca on social media, testifying to how the cultural intimacy experienced by the laughing bus passengers was extended to audiences in other locations. One YouTube user shared that they ‘cried’ after watching the video, first from laughter and then from ‘emotions.’ Additional comments read Fonseca’s creativity as characteristic of a ‘unique’ Cuban spirit in the face of hardship. Another YouTube user mentioned that they regularly watched the clip of Fonseca’s rhyming inside the bus, stating, ‘Every time I’m sad or exhausted, I immediately smile, and my problems calm down.’ The commenter added, ‘God bless this character. Long live Cuba.’ Such reactions once again underscore the significance of the *pregón* as a phenomenon capable of providing insiders with an affective ‘assurance’ of their common sociality (Herzfeld 1997, 3).
**Conclusion: Listening to Street Life**

This article has explored the meanings and melodies of Cuban *pregoneros*, tracing their evolution since the 1959 revolution. Despite concerns among historians and folklorists that the *pregón* would soon disappear, a closer look reveals how vendors have adapted to shifting circumstances by leveraging contemporary technologies, cultural references and impulses to develop affective ties with listeners. In recent years, the intersection of digital technologies, particularly the internet and smartphones, has presented both challenges and opportunities for the *pregoneros*. Some listeners criticize the use of recorded jingles as monotonous and ‘metallic’ compared to the more intricate rhymes and rhythms of the past. Yet digital technologies and platforms inadvertently showcase the richness of musical expression among today’s ambulant vendors. The viral success of videos such as Gilberto Gonzalez’s reggaeton-infused *pregón* about toilet paper or Osmany Fonseca’s rhymes about caramels and social struggles inside a crowded bus illustrates how modern technology can amplify the appeal of this musical-commercial practice.

Ultimately, whether listeners express criticism or praise, laughter or nostalgia, these responses speak to the potency of the *pregón* as a form of expression. While influenced by the socio-political environment, ambulant vendors also excel at shaping the environments in which they move and trade. The success of a *pregonero* lies not simply in conveying information but also in producing affects, whether through a jingle that lingers in people’s minds or by making potential customers smile through double meanings and implicit references, thriving in the often-concealed zone of cultural intimacy shared with their listeners.

What lessons does the ethnographic-historical study of the Cuban *pregoneros* offer anthropologists working within and beyond the island? First, this essay cautions against analytical optics that essentialize or de-historicize any given content of ‘cultural intimacy’ (Herzfeld 1997). To stay true to the dynamism of the social world, scholars must resist the temptation to ‘freeze’ their object of study. In the words of musicologist Robin Moore, writing about the shifting tides of musical expression in Cuba since the 1950s: ‘The importance of Cuban folklore is precisely that it is not a static remnant from a bygone age but rather a dynamic mode of expression rooted in the everyday lives of the population, one that continues to develop’ (Moore 2006, 196). Similarly, we have seen how the *pregón* is a more vital phenomenon than certain folkloristic studies and popular recollections allow for. The adaptability of street vendors, combined with the unintended consequences of digital technology, underscores the resilience and creativity of this form of cultural expression.

Second, by drawing inspiration from the growing anthropological and related scholarly interest in how people understand, regulate, and experience sound, this study emphasizes the utility of an analytical perspective that attends to people’s sensory and affective experiences, particularly their sensations and understandings of everyday street sounds. By examining the affective appeal and political regulation
of the *pregoneros*, I have offered a glimpse into concerns and dynamics that characterize everyday life in Cuba. In recent years, many Cubans have interpreted the shifting sounds of ambulant vendors dismissively, hinting at a nostalgic longing for a better past amid a present situation marked by growing scarcity and precarity. However, contemporary *pregoneros* also evoke cheers and celebrations of their creativity and ingenuity in the face of hardship, as seen in examples of ambulant sellers whose expressions have spread online. A social phenomenon that can provoke such contradictory responses while remaining a source of significance through centuries is surely worth closer inspection.

**Author Bio**

*Ståle Wig* is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo. He researches popular economy, politics, and meaning under authoritarian systems of government. He has conducted ethnographic research among retail traders, housing intermediaries, taxi drivers, and fruit sellers in Havana, and is currently finishing a monograph about market reforms in Cuba. Wig has also written a general-audience book titled *Havana Taxi: Life and Lies in the New Cuba*, published in 2022 by Kagge Publishers in Norwegian, with a new edition forthcoming in Spanish by Editorial Hypermedia.

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