

# Babalooo! Where Are You?

Among the chaos  
of Cuba, Abdala  
Studios stands ready  
to make music

BY C. REEDER

Congas and claves punctuate the air with a pulsating salsa beat when the door swings open to Studio 1, mixing with the rich smoke of a Cohiba cigar and vapors from my *café Cubano*, a coffee substance, not unlike car oil, that my American friends affectionately call legalized speed. I am in Cuba, sitting in the lounge of the recording studio, Abdala, chatting with Katia and Sandra. Katia is an attorney for the studio and Sandra is a client liaison and, much to my relief, has a B.A. in English.

People on the street look at me with bemused horror when I try to speak what I can only call Spanglish. Things like, "Bueno, mi gusta...¿Old Havana?" I sputter as I jump into a taxi, while waving and pointing to the place on the map where I want to go. Gesturing and facial expressions can only get you so far. I wasn't sure I wanted to test my less than stellar foreign language skills on humorless looking guys with guns in army fatigues standing in these little wooden boxes [one sees] all over the place.

English is not the first language in Cuba.

In *Habana Vieja* (Old Havana), a big tourist stop, pot-holed streets are jammed with scooters, Chinese bicycles, Russian Ladas, new Korean cars, pedestrians from cruise ships, and huge

American-made metal relics from the '50s in various stages of disrepair, spewing miasmic fumes from exhaust pipes.

*Nuemáticos*, hombres who fish from inner tubes, balance tires on their heads as they march down the Malécon and disappear over the historic seawall. This is the Cuban version of fast food.

Only 200 physical miles from my house, but light years from the world I know, I strain to find some common ground in this enigma called Cuba. My desire for wanting to be here is all mixed up with a love of all kinds of Latin music and images of myself as a very little girl in a living room with her family in Columbus, Ohio watching the colorful Ricky Ricardo sing "Babalooo" out of a little black-and-white television box.

The common ground is, of course, ¡Música!...and at Abdala Studios, music rules.

Abdala Studios is the brainchild of the gifted Cuban musician and songwriter Silvio Rodríguez, and built

with the support of the government-owned CIMEX Corporation. With international interest in a cha-cha-cha over Cuban music, et al., the time is right. ¡Ya es tiempo!

Opened for a year and nestled in the Miramar District of Havana, Abdala Studios is over 16,000 square feet, with three recording rooms, one large enough for an orchestra, a MIDI room, mastering room, and state-of-the-art SSLs in a compound totally self-contained (see sidebar).

One can get delicious *cubano* food from short-order cooks and drinks from the bar, like a Cristal beer or *Havana Club y Coca cola*. CDs of the artists who have recorded there are for sale, or you can take home studio paraphernalia like hats, t-shirts, etc. The U.S. dollar is the currency.

Abdala is a short drive from sparkling five-star hotels on the water, through neighborhoods of crumbling apartment buildings and dilapidated Andalusian-era style mansions. Along the way, I pass by the lonely looking Russian Embassy with all 30 concrete stories hovering over its neighbors and sending off morgue-like vibes.

The U.S. Treasury Department prohibits U.S. citizens from spending mon-



GOING SOUTH: Abdala Studios provides a self-contained musical oasis in the heart of Cuba.

ey in Cuba, so most of the clientele are artists and record companies from Europe, particularly Spain or Germany, Japan, South America, Mexico, and Canada.

The current project pumping sounds out of Studio 1 is a three-CD set called *Tocando Tierra* (playing/touching the earth) produced by Don Grusin and Frank Quintero, engineered by Roger Nichols, and executive produced by Samuel Quiros and Alejandro Zalles for Latin World Productions, S.A.

*Tocando Tierra* is an eclectic feast of over 30 musicians from various musical genres and sizzling with talent like the Habana Ensemble, Bela Fleck, Abraham Laboriel, Alex Acuña, Jerry Hay, and singers such as Ilan, Luis Enrique, and Soledad.

Sandra explains that Abdala Studios was named after a heroic character (i.e., died in battle) from an early epic poem by revered José Martí. Martí was a revolutionary hero who himself died fighting in a battle to free Cuba from Spanish colonialism at the turn of the last century, a mirror image of the character he created decades earlier.

Unlike the dead fictional Abdala, Abdala Studios is very much alive and kicking. Martí wrote in *Our America*, "The thought is the father to the deed." To that end, Abdala Studios is the new proud parent of recordings by Aldo Lopez, Carlos Puebla, José María Vitier,

Amaury Pérez, and a televised tribute to the barbarian of rhythm, Benny Moré, for RTV called, *A Benny*. A publishing company is in the works and Unicornio Publishing will handle all catalogs in house.

I find out later from other sources that Sandra and Katia are paid the equivalent of around \$20 a month, and

Well, and why not? In my global community the musician is usually at the bottom of the money food chain.

My approach to international politics consists of repeating my Cicero mantra, may-I-have-your-leave-not-to-know-what-I-do-not-know. Both sides of the almost 40-year-old U.S./Cuba embargo make a point. At what point does the point

not matter anymore?

As the Mambo King neared death "...he heard the heavy bronze bells of the cathedrals of Santiago and Havana ringing simultaneously, he heard the titling-ttling of a bicycle and blinked and saw the Havana night, shoots of light in the sky, a thousand trumpets and drums in the distance, cars honking, and the low murmur, like an ocean, of nighttime crowds." (Oscar Hijuelos©1989)

Well, so what if I turn into a big mush about Cuba.

From Silvio, who is in the habit of

"discovering amazing things" comes this lyric, "Only love engenders miracles, only love turns clay into miracles."

Abdala Studios is a miracle in the making and a labor of love. Anyone with a heart drummed by a Salsa beat or an emotion emblazoned by a bolero would agree.

Find out more by visiting [www.abdala.cubaweb.cu/indexi.htm](http://www.abdala.cubaweb.cu/indexi.htm) or e-mailing [abdala@imagenes.get.cma.net](mailto:abdala@imagenes.get.cma.net).

## ABDALA STUDIOS GEAR LIST

### Studio 1

SSL 4056 G+ Ultimatum Total Recall  
Studer 827 48-track digital recorder  
TASCAM DA-88, DA 38 48-track + RC 848

#### Monitors: Control Room

Genelec 1031 A  
Genelec 1035 B  
Yamaha NS 10 Pro

#### Monitors: Control Studio

JBL 4412  
AKG 270 Headphones

#### Studio Outboard Gear

Lexicon 480 LARC  
Lexicon 300  
Lexicon PCM 90  
Lexicon PCM 80  
Lexicon MPX 1  
TC Electronic M 5000  
TC Electronic TC 2290  
TC Electronic M 2000 Wizard  
Eventide DSP 4000  
Roland SDE 330  
Yamaha SPX 990  
dbx 160s Tube compressor  
Summit Audio DCL 200 Tube compressor  
GML 8200 parametric equalizer  
AMEK 9098 preamp/EQ  
Aphex Compellor 320 A  
Aphex Dominator II 720  
Aphex Aural Exciter type III model 250  
Aphex Aural Exciter C2 with Big Bottom  
Aphex Expressor  
BBE 862 Sonic Maximizer  
Focusrite Voice Box  
Apogee AD 1000  
Studer D780 DAT  
TASCAM 122 MK III  
TASCAM CD 601

### Studio 3

SSL 4040 G+ Total Recall  
Studer A 827 24-track analog recorder with Dolby SR  
Alesis XT with 24 track + BRC

#### Monitors: Control Room

Genelec 1031 A  
Genelec 1035 B  
Yamaha NS 10 Pro  
Monitors: Control Studio

JBL 4410

AKG 270 Headphones

#### Studio Outboard Gear

Lexicon 480 LARC  
Lexicon 300  
Lexicon PCM 90  
Lexicon PCM 80  
Lexicon MPX 1  
TC Electronic M 5000  
TC Electronic TC 2290  
TC Electronic M 2000 Wizard  
Eventide DSP 4000  
Roland SDE 330  
Yamaha SPX 990  
dbx 160s Tube compressor  
Summit Audio DCL 200 Tube compressor  
GML 8200 parametric equalizer  
AMEK 9098 Preamp/EQ  
Aphex Compellor 320 A  
Aphex Dominator II 720  
Aphex Aural Exciter type III model 250  
Aphex Aural Exciter C2 with Big Bottom  
Aphex Expressor  
BBE 862 Sonic Maximizer  
Focusrite Voice Box  
Apogee AD 1000  
Studer D780 DAT  
TASCAM 122 MK III  
TASCAM CD 601

### MIDI Studio

AKAI CD 3000 XL sampler  
EMU, Roland, Korg, Kawai and Yamaha keyboards

Yamaha, Roland Sound Canvas and Kurzweil sound modules  
Mac 7600 computers with Digital and S.S Performers

Yamaha 02R mixer

Yamaha Pro Mix 01 mixer

ADAT XT digital recorder

### Mastering Room

Apple Macintosh Power PC 9600/233 160 MB RAM  
Pro Tools 24, loaded with plug ins including:  
D-FX (digital reverb)  
DPP (digital pitch processor)  
Focusrite d2/d3  
DINR TDM version 2.2  
Complete CEDAR digital audio restoration system  
TC Electronic Finalizer Plus mastering processor  
CD mastering with Digidesign's Master List CD version 2.0  
Yamaha 02R Digital Mixing Console. (Software version 2.0)  
Genelec 1031 A studio monitors  
Studer D780 DAT  
Panasonic SV 4100 DAT  
CDR 400 ATx Yamaha CD writer  
Denon D790R professional cassette deck

### Microphones

AKG  
Beyer  
Brüel&Kjaer  
Manley Gold  
Microtech Gefell GMBH  
Neumann  
Schoeps  
Sennheiser  
Shure

Contact: Calle 32 No. 318, esquina Sta Avenida,  
Miramar, Ciudad Habana, Cuba  
Teléfonos: (53-7) 24-4000, 24-4008, 24-4009.

Fax: (53-7) 24-4006

E-mail: [abdala@imagenes.get.cma.net](mailto:abdala@imagenes.get.cma.net)

are not allowed to meet me for a drink to chat at my hotel. I am told Cubans are not allowed in hotels where *turistas* stay.

The word on the street is that life for the average Cuban "got a lot worse" when the economy converted to dollars. Since the current rate is 22 Cuban pesos to one dollar, it's not hard to figure out why. The Cuban government doesn't allow Cubans to earn U.S. dollars directly, although I was told this is changing — at least for some musicians.