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# OBSESIÓN – THE CONSCIENCE OF CUBAN HIP-HOP



**We thank Peter Jordens for bringing this item to our attention.**

Pioneering Havana-based hip-hop duo Obsesión (formed in 1996) have played a leading role in Cuba's hip-hop movement, helping to establish the genre as a legitimate expression of the island's popular culture. For them, hip-hop is a way to talk about every-day issues; their music offers critical perspectives on Cuban society through the lenses of race and gender. In 2006 *Billboard* magazine selected La Fabri-K, an album co-produced by Obsesión and Doble Filo, from among 1,300 contenders as one of the six finalists for the Independent Music World Series. Obsesión has a history of collaboration with local neighborhood organizations, cultural centers, and prisons involving popular education projects.

They may be the conscience of Cuban's hip-hop scene, but Alexey Rodríguez Mola and Magia López are far too modest to see themselves that way. Never mind that they've shared a stage with The Roots, and that their fan base includes Harry Belafonte, Afrika Bambaata and Mos Def. Leave aside their stand-out track on the "Cuban Hip-Hop All Stars" compilation. Ignore their starring performance in a 2005 documentary that follows them from open-mike sessions at Cuban house parties ("bonches") to their history-making, against-all-odds appearance at New York's Apollo Theatre. Obsesión, as this husband-wife duo call themselves, prove that humility doesn't have to be incompatible with hip-hop stardom.

Alexey and Magia live and work in Regla, an industrial suburb east of Havana. Dock-side petroleum refinery, shipyards and warehouses are Regla's financial heart. But Regla's soul belongs to the Afro-Cuban cultural legacy that began with the freed slaves who settled here in the 19th century. The first of the secret Abakuá societies — modeled on the Èfik Èkpe and Ejagham Úgbè societies of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon — were founded in Regla as early as 1836. Today Santería pilgrims as well as all varieties of tourists come here to visit La Santísima Virgen de Regla, the "black Madonna" statue housed in the town's colonial church.

About three blocks from this church is Obsesión's locus operandi, a flat where living space and working space are synonymous, where a PC mixing console, a makeshift recording booth, a bed and bookshelves co-exist in the same room. On one wall is a "Free Mumia Abu Jamal" poster. On another, a painting of Cuba's flag ("someone gave it to us after our show in Canada," Alexey explains).

A recent visit found them laying down tracks for a song on their forthcoming album, with Alexey in the recording booth and Magia at the console and then vice-versa. In the space of a heartbeat Magia's vocals can travel from a sultry whisper to a devastating power blow. Alexey's arrangements are as likely to feature layered funk breakbeats as sparse percussion lines, such as the Conga drumming that backs Magia's tribute to Havana's prostitutes: "They call you puta, they're not aware your body is blessed ...."

The birthplace of Cuban rap is usually considered to be Alamar, another suburb east of Havana. Every summer since 1995 the Alamar Festival has been the island's pre-eminent rap showcase, where Cuban artists share a stage with Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Common, Dead Prez and other top acts from everywhere in the world. Alexey and Magia performed at the second Alamar festival, a mere two months after they had become Obsesión. After that it was a short trip across the bay to Havana's most prestigious concert venues: Cine Riviera, La Piragua, La Tropical, Gran Teatro de la Habana....

Alexey had been a breakdancer and a fan of U.S. hip-hop (which Cubans call 'la moñá'). He was working as a lathe operator and sculptor when, in 1993, he met Magia. She had spent four years performing with an Afro-Cuban dance troupe and earned a communications degree before she too became a sculptor.

Alexey and Magia shared a hip-hop dream that had little to do with waving their hands in the air like they just don't care. "We saw Obsesión as a kind of tuning fork," Alexey recalls, "allowing us to stay on-pitch when addressing various aspects of love as well as social and political themes."

Writing, composing and producing for Obsesión, Alexey has helped demonstrate hip-hop's role as a legitimate expression of Cuban culture. Through his participation in a multidisciplinary arts project called La Fabri-K, he has provided support for up-and-coming rappers, encouraging them to interact with painters, sculptors, poets and dancers. Magia, meanwhile, has been an inspired participant in the debates that take place during each year's Alamar Festival, advocating for women's rights with particular eloquence.

In addition to various Cuban hip-hop compilations, Obsesión has been involved in some more surprising collaborations. They appear on jazzman Roberto Fonseca's "Tiene Que Ver" album, as well as Augusto Enrique's "Cuando Yo Sea Grande", both from 1998.

The title of Obsesión's first CD, which appeared in 2000, comes as less of a surprise, however: "Un Montón de Cosas" ("A Pile of Things) hints at the diversity of Alexey and Magia's interests. It was again a collaboration with Roberto Fonseca, who composed, arranged and produced it.

Beyond their musical endeavors, Obsesión's activities include development programs for prisons and disadvantaged Havana neighborhoods, and a plan to create two theatre troupes for children. In 2006 they attended the World Social Forum in Venezuela and performed at the Festival of Hip-Hop to Fight Against AIDS.

For the original piece, go to <http://www.havana-cultura.com/en/int/cuban-music/obsesion/hip-hop-artist>.

For more about Obsesión, see their website, <http://www.obsesioncuba.net>.

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