

# LUCKY CHARM RANCH

Bisbee, Arizona

## EDISON'S 2 - MINUTE CUBAN CYLINDERS: A Preliminary Study.

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The 2-minute cylinders recorded by the National Phonograph Co. in Havana represent, like those done in Mexico City, an excellent example of cultural preservation through recorded sound. One might say that though not as numerous as their Mexican counterparts, their contribution is perhaps more important in that greater emphasis is placed on indigenous, or at least older, influences.

As in Mexico, National already had explored, along with its competitors, the sales potential for its products, finding it promising by the turn of the century; in this case phonographs, "Spanish" cylinders, and of course the usual U.S. popular selections now gaining acceptance in the Pan-American market.

Political and financial instability of the Cuban Revolution of the 1890's had been replaced by relative calm under the provisional U.S. military government following the Spanish-American War, and during this friendly occupation Gen. Leonard Wood made great strides in eliminating the scourge of yellow fever and beginning a modern road system, preparing the nation not only for independence (20. May 1902), but for increased commercial interaction and even tourism.

In this greatly improved atmosphere, representatives of National's Foreign Department traveled throughout Cuba and sent back encouraging reports. Indeed, the large initial batch of Mexico City cylinders secured in 1904 was presented as being for both Mexico "and Cuba", the latter considered secondary and the U.S. tertiary to the burgeoning Mexican market itself.

Edison Phonograph Monthly for Sept. 1905 quoted the Foreign Department's Walter Stevens: "...Mexico is one of the best talking-machine countries there is...Cuba is also very good..." and plans were laid for National's first recording expedition to Cuba. Around the end of that year recording experts George Werner and Fred. Burt traveled to Havana to begin work.

National's Mexico City manager, Rafael Cabanas, had cabled the two after securing a building at 146 (Avenida) Industria, and preparing it for a temporary recording laboratory. Based on "the demand for typical Cuban music and songs of this Republic," countless amusement places were visited, and dozens of vocal and instrumental performers were auditioned, of whom "the best" were selected and placed under contract. Recording schedules were made up "and the work of making Records started." In a span of three months, Werner and Burt took "over 300 masters of Cuban selections by native artists," according to EPM of April 1906, before returning to New York in March. The HAVANA DAILY TELEGRAPH described them in glowing terms:

"About 300 selections were secured, among these being the Banda Municipal de la Habana, under the direction of the well-known band master, Sr. G.M. Tomas, the Banda de Artilleria, the orchestras of Pablo Valenzuela and Enrique Pena, sextette of Antonio Torroella, the Ramos instrumental trio; and vocal solos, duets, trios and quartettes by the best theatrical talent in Havana and the rest of the Island.

"A large number of selections of typical Cuban country songs, 'Puntos Guajiros' were made, as well as a number of typical Spanish songs which are popular in Cuba. All these Records will be shipped to the Edison Laboratory, where the permanent Master Records will be made."

Following the precedent set in Mexico City, a gala entertainment and dinner was presented for a party of Phonograph dealers and (*of course!*) press representatives. It was catered by the Hotel Telegrafo, and included an instrumental trio (*Ramos?*) which demonstrated how Master Records were taken, and a vocalist who "entertained the visitors with improvised selections, which included comments on the different representatives of the newspapers, the Mexican manager, the ex-secretary and the expert recording operators." The proceedings were duly reported in detail in the HAVANA DAILY TELEGRAPH.

U.S. interest and involvement in Cuba continued to expand, adding to long established trade such as sugar, tobacco, and henequin fibre for rope, the beginnings of modern tourism. EPM for June 1907 enthusiastically forecast that, "So much interest is being evinced in this country concerning Cuba and things Cuban, that these Records should prove quick sellers."

205 selections were offered to U.S. dealers, and Cuban records were successfully sold in Mexico, although nowhere does the "Banda de Artilleria" of Cuba appear. (*Not to be confused with B.A. of Mexico.*) In November of 1907, National added six domestically-recorded "South American National Hymns," and EPM quoted the Denver Dry Goods Co. of Denver, Colorado: "We have had the new Cuban Records on sale for several weeks...doing a nice business in them...receiving re-orders from the different Dealers who purchased an initial line. We expect the line as a whole will be quite a success."

It went on to advise dealers to add these "active" Cuban records to their older foreign catalogues, and in the following month sounded a prophetic note with the question, "Would we rather bring the artists here or send the experts away to make records?... At the present time we have a corps of Cubans doing work in the Laboratory (N.Y.) under the capable direction of Walter Miller...We are also bringing a number of people from Buenos Aires for the same purpose..."

But in the same issue, Dec. 1907, all the Cuban cylinders made thus far were dropped from the U.S. catalogue, except for sixty mainly band, orchestra and instrumental selections, due to "limited sale." Dealers were advised, however, that the entire 205 still were available on order.

Perhaps the Cuban revolt and resulting U.S. intervention (1906-09), discouraged further Cuban on-site recording activities; we may never know. Be that as it may, following six months of Foreign Catalogue revisions, newly-made Cuban cylinders were added along with several European entries, and mention was made in EPM in Feb. 1908.

No mention, however, was made that the new Cuban releases had been recorded in New York. These efforts appear to have been limited to an 8 July 1907 recording session by the Orquesta de Filipe Valdes, several sessions from 1 to 18. Nov. 1907 featuring male vocal duets by Adolfo Colombo and Claudio Garcia (*plus one Garcia solo*), and a final Colombo-Garcia session on 30. Dec. 1907. Of these only Colombo had recorded previously for National in Havana.

This marked the end of Edison's 2-minute Cuban cylinders, but these superb examples of a Cuba now vanished or nearly so--not just the fine concert band and marvelous orchestras with their bass drums, maraccas and "huesitos", but the chanting puntos guajiros (*country songs*), flamenco canciones Espanolas, and unique bagpipe-accompanied song stories from Asturias, Spain, or "Aires Asturianos"--are both startling in their recording quality and inestimably important as historical documents.

EDISON 2-MIN. CUBAN SERIES: 18858-19062, Havana. ?Dec. 1905 - Mch. 1906.

19083-19112, N.Y., ?8 Jul. 1907. 19133-19172, N.Y., ?1,2,3,4,6,11,18. Nov. 1907. 20700-20711, 30. Dec. 1907. Special thanks to Richard Spottswood, ETHNIC MUSIC ON RECORDS, Vol. 4, for N.Y. recording dates. I have questioned 8 July 1907 only because there may have been another unknown session, given the sheer quantity of Valdes recordings, and Nov. 1907 in case lower numbers might have derived from Havana masters, which I believe unlikely.

ADDENDA AND CORRIGENDA, "EDISON IN MEXICO, 1904-1912: A PRELIMINARY STUDY.

Ch. 1, Sep. 1994: Paragraph 4. This cylinder is presumed lost, but I had forgotten that while manufacturing Excelsior cylinder records Ca. 1956, I had dubbed it onto a second cylinder. Astoundingly, the dub, in perfect shape, was discovered recently in a cabinet by Ray Phillips! El Mochuelo lives again.

Ch. 2, Nov. 1994: Paragraph 12. A brief notice in EPM Apl. 1908, states that Werner and Burt sailed from N.Y. on 19. Mch. following the 16. Mch. departure of Walter Stevens "for a visit to the Mexican Office" and who would be gone "about 6 weeks." The three were to make "another series of Mexican selections. Does the Aug. 1909 EPM in referring to W. & B.'s reaching Mexico City "early last April" making "another series," "now completed" indicate 1908 or 1909? There indeed may have been two sessions, 1908 and 1909, which I am checking.

**C.A.P.S. Business Meeting**  **Starts Promptly at 2:00 p.m.**