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TALKING FILES: The Bennies

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Rafael González and Rafael Semanat, The Bennies, two hot black men and gray-headed are important characters within the Havanian Historical Center in the early 2000's. Let it be known that the merit was not free: with their three-piece suits, lineage hats, smoky long cigars, flashy ties, flowers on their lapels, colored vests, two-color shoes and unique walking sticks, pay tribute to a funny character Benny More. In addition they show visitors the secrets of the Cuban Son music, cha cha cha, rumba or bolero to make them live the charm of old times.

The first character of our story dances since he was a young boy. His father, a fruit salesman, used to play music on Sundays to torment the neighborhood and, between bottles of rum and brawls; he taught him his first dance steps. Then, at age six or seven, he meets Benny More during his performances outside the Capitol and, almost without realizing it he is captive of the carnival coaches and swing of the hips of the processions of blacks.

Having this background, this retired teacher appears, one day, at the refurbished Cathedral Square in the 90's and challenges Juan Parole to an old slump fight. Former sailor who, in the end, chooses him as couple with the purpose of remembering the greatest Sonero and his Giant Band. Of course, the success of the duet is instant and together with the Gitana of Havana, Juana the Cuban, and Pillo Chocolate, these popular characters have the task of giving new spins to the hard and eternal stone of Old Havana.

When I ran into Rafael González in 2007 at El Patio restaurant, on the side of the Cathedral, he commented me with enthusiasm capable of laughing at the face of any misfortune:

«I live in Calabazar and since I leave my house I have all eyes on me. What's more, when I get on a bus they can't stop yelling at me: The Benny!, The Benny!... next to my partner, I walk, almost every day, around the bars where there are music groups to enjoy and amuse people for a while. Our duty is to remember El Barbaro del Ritmo, to songwriter of Que bueno baila usted, an unforgettable song.

«Tourists follow us for being a folklore attraction and Cubans admire us for dressing like this all the time, in

December or August; with chilling cold or an unbearable heat. Experts from China, Russia, Spain... have shot videos and also taken pictures in magazines and newspapers from all over the world. We sometimes do modeling of the time, driving old cars around and stuff like that...

«Besides our profound admiration to Benny More, we defend the fancy way of dressing of the time, which clearly opposes the scantily clad attires of nowadays. It's enough of making ugly the streets with shorts, T-shirts and sleepers! The City Historian, Eusebio Leal is concerned, he is a bright man, thanks to him we are remembering what is good, unique...».

After Parole passed away, Rafael González makes a nice partner with his namesake Rafael Semanat, a mulatto son of the wit from the tropic and talkative even in his sleep:

«I am a retired painter, born in San Luis, in the former Oriente province, and I have lived for many years in Havana next to three daughters and grandsons—he said firmly—. Here, at the Cathedral, they asked to wear a suit of Benny and I was very happy. He is a myth, a glory for all generations, for history. Everything turned out easy for me, because I have always been a great casino dancer: I visited Santiago de las Vegas, The Quintica, and «gave a twist» with the orchestras of Neno González, Pancho el Bravo and Estrellas Cubanas.

«According to certain people, our imitations are senile insanity or an enthusiasm of old people bored to death. It's a pity those bitter men can't understand the true worth of music in the past as well as street dance. They miss it!».

Rafael González died a few years back with the songs he loved still fresh, but Rafael Semanat has kept walking on the hard paving stones of the capital and sometimes accompanied by Wilky Arencibia, the Gentleman of Son music, he tries to teach foreigners how to dance Son music. They store away in their suitcases when leaving their shirts wet with sweat from the effort and joy.

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