

# Drinking, Dining, and Dancing

*"This is Cuba, Mister."*

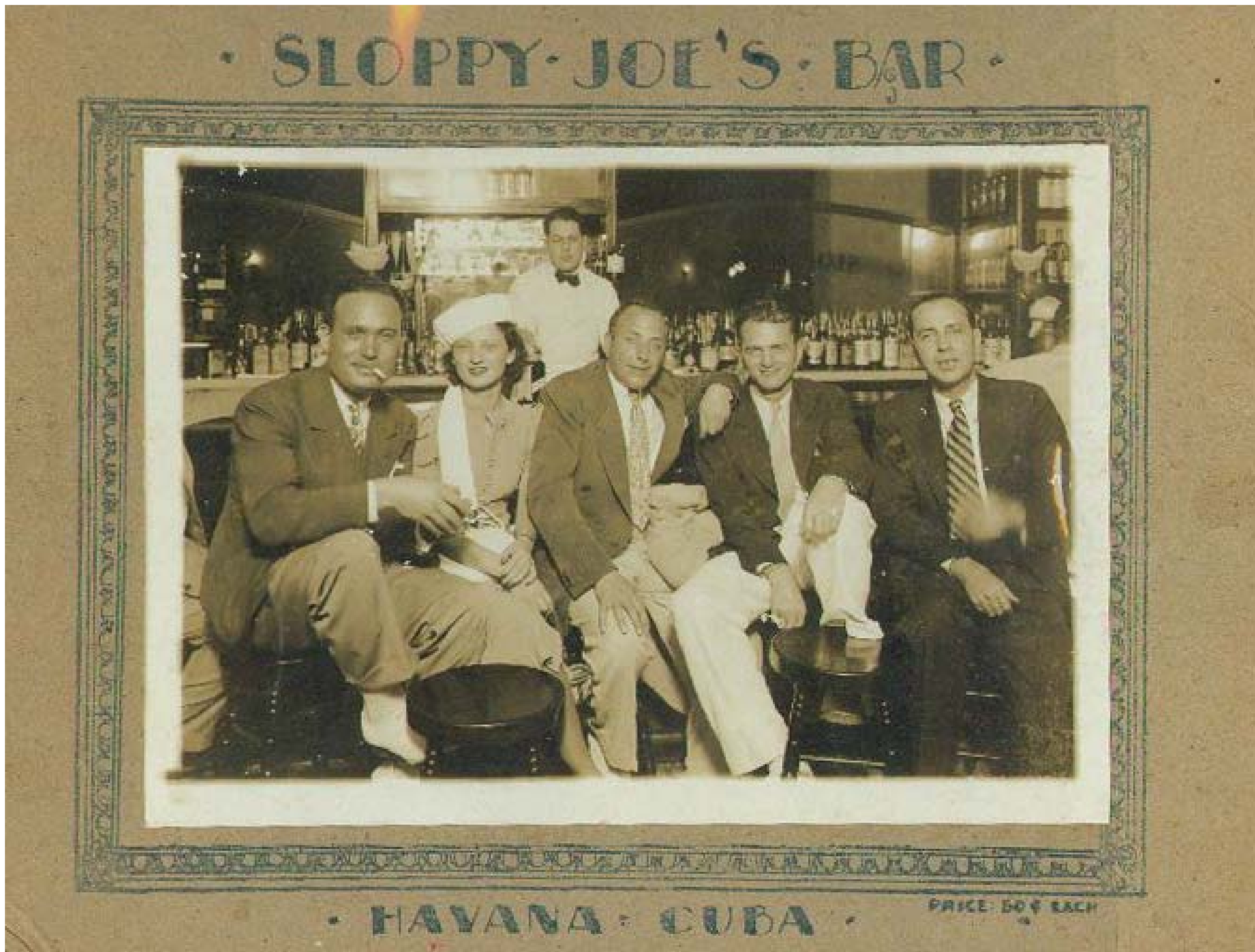
—Tropicana comedy revue, 1958



**RIGHT:**  
The dynamic Mary and Rudy dancers  
"Los Torbellinos del Tropic" ("The  
Tropical Whirlpool") perform on a  
popular Havana television show.

*As the nightlife capital* of the Caribbean, Havana had hundreds of bars, restaurants, and clubs, from seedy dives to fabulous show-rooms, all over the city. The most popular nightspots were concentrated near the Prado, central Havana's promenade, or in the vicinity of Calle 23 (Twenty-Third Street), a sloping thoroughfare known as La Rampa in the city's sophisticated Vedado district.





Among Havana's bars, Sloppy Joe's was in a league all its own, having maintained its reputation as the most popular watering hole for Americans from Prohibition through the Batista years. Havana's Sloppy Joe's existed long before the Key West version of the same name. During the 1930s, Sloppy Joe published small pocket-sized cocktail manuals that included a short history of the bar. According to the booklet, José Abeal, a Spanish emigrant who had worked for many years as a bartender in both New Orleans and Havana, converted a small grocery store

on the corner of Obispo and Zulueta streets into a saloon in 1918. While several American friends were visiting José "and seeing the poor appearance and filthy-looking condition of the place, one of them said 'Why, Joe, this place is certainly sloppy, look at the filthy water running from under the counter.' From here on, the name Sloppy Joe stuck to José Abeal as part of his own life and was destined to make him and his business famous and internationally known." Curiously, there were other legends regarding the bar's odd name, including one involving a vindictive



# Sloppy Joe's Then and Now



FACING, LEFT:  
Sloppy Joe's circa 1927.

FACING, RIGHT:  
The same view in 2007 during its reconstruction.  
Sloppy Joe's closed after suffering a devastating fire in the 1960s.

## Sloppy Joe's

"Sloppy Joe is not Cuba," Sydney Clark scolded readers of his 1946 travel guide, *All The Best In Cuba*. He was bemoaning that most American tourists went straight from their cruise ships to Sloppy Joe's Bar, and then straight back to their ships again. Joe's was the only thing they saw in Havana, despite the fact that, according to Clark, the bar served "ordinary drinks in a wholly undistinguished setting." Its patrons were 90 percent American tourists, lured to Joe's by the power of marketing (proprietor José "Sloppy Joe" Abeal had been made into a legendary figure by his journalist regulars) and the comfort of the familiar (Cuban citizens dismissed Joe's as an "American" bar). But after obtaining a Sloppy Joe's recipe booklet dating from the 1935 tourist season, we differ with Sydney Clark on one point: Joe's drinks were anything but ordinary. In fact, most were quite inventive, such as this 1935 signature drink.

—Jeff Berry

## Sloppy Joe's

2 ounces pineapple juice  
1 ounce cognac  
1 ounce port wine  
1/4 teaspoon orange curaçao  
1/4 teaspoon grenadine

Shake well with plenty of crushed ice. Pour into a tall glass. Serve with a straw.







**LEFT :**  
A young Frank Sinatra flanked by mobsters Joe (left) and Rocco Fischetti at Sloppy Joe's in December 1946. They were in town for the infamous "Havana Summit" of U.S. gangsters presided over by Lucky Luciano at the Hotel Nacional.

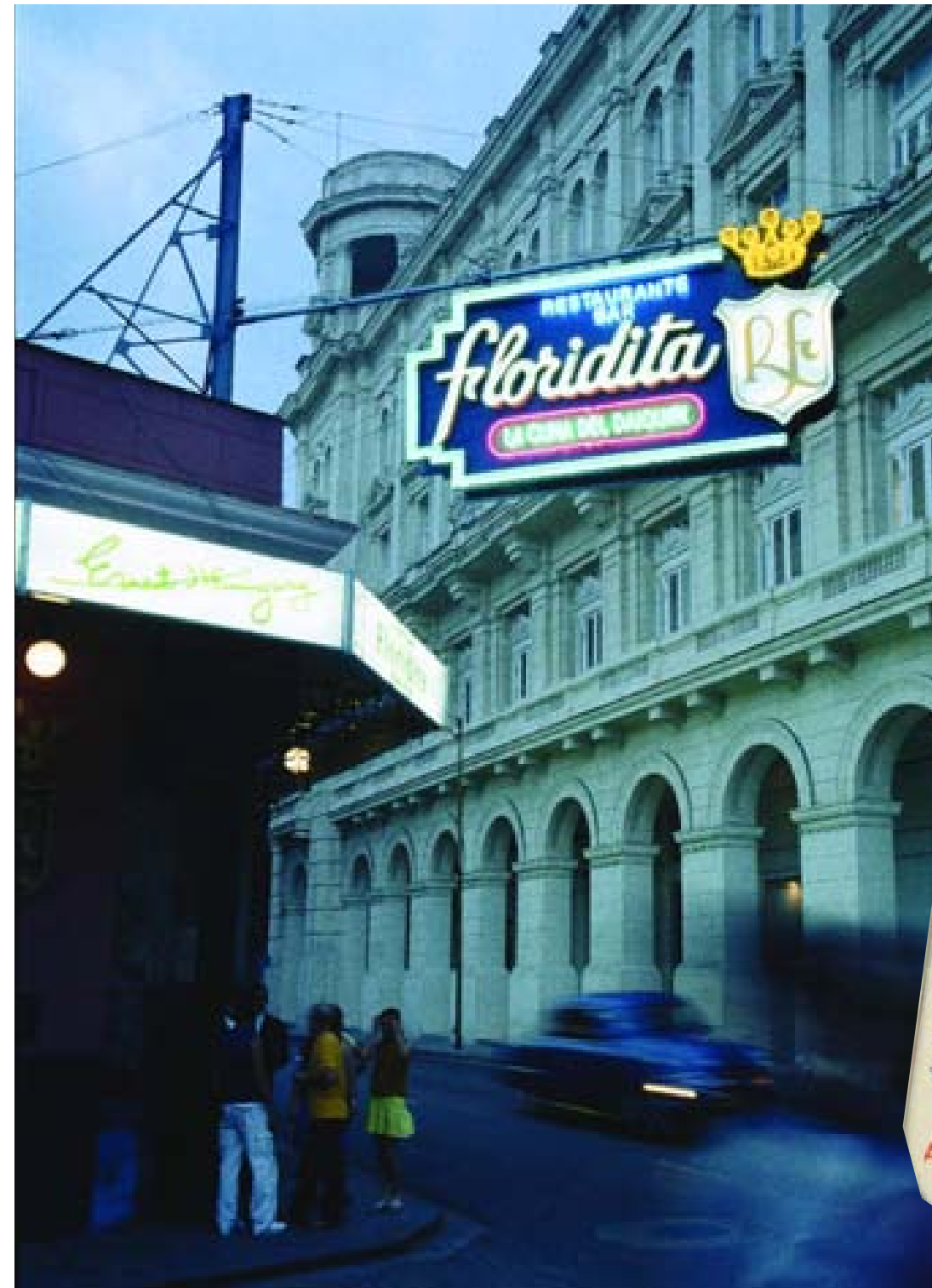
**FACING :**  
Outside the Floridita bar and restaurant, Hemingway's favorite hangout, in 2007.

Havana newspaperman who, having been ejected from the joint by Abeal after refusing to pay his bar tab, retaliated by opining in his column that the bar should be called Sloppy Joe's on account of its dirty appearance.

Having opened just as Prohibition's priggish restrictions were shuttering bars from New York to Los Angeles, Sloppy Joe's welcomed Americans for over four decades with a cocktail menu consisting of

over eighty recipes, including the American Girl, Blue Moon, Mary Pickford, Millionaire, Around the World, Miami, Havana, Fox Movietone News [!], and the house drink—Sloppy Joe's. Like most Havana pubs, Sloppy Joe's also sold sandwiches, cigars, and bottled booze. Indeed, Sloppy Joe's bar was stocked to the rafters with display cases containing its own brand of twelve-year-old rum.

After World War II, Sloppy Joe's original



Prohibition-era slogan "First port of call, out where the wet begins" became "Where the great of the world and the not-so-great meet daily." One of the world's greats who dropped by was Frank Sinatra during a visit to Havana in December 1946 in the company of his buddies the Fischetti brothers, Joe and Rocco, gangster cousins of Al Capone. Not coincidentally, Ol' Blue Eyes and the boys were in Cuba for the infamous mafia summit of 1946 held at Havana's Hotel Nacional, where exiled mob boss Lucky Luciano formally anointed Meyer Lansky as Cuba's gambling syndicate boss.

Not far from Sloppy Joe's was the famous La Floridita bar/restaurant, renowned as the "cuna del daiquiri" (cradle of the daiquiri). La Floridita was





# Floridita Then and Now



## The Floridita

Remarkably, from the furnishings to the place settings, the Floridita hasn't changed in fifty years, retaining the historic character—and sublime daiquiri cocktails—that Hemingway would recognize if he were alive today.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:  
Floridita dining room circa 1955; the bar circa 1955; the restaurant in 2007.

FACING:  
The bar in 2007.



# La Floridita Daiquiri

Legend has it that that Jennings Cox, an American engineer working at a Cuban copper mine near the coastal town of Daiquiri, invented the daiquiri cocktail one evening after work in 1896. A conflicting story places the birth of the daiquiri in Santiago de Cuba circa 1898, when a U.S. soldier named William Shafter added ice to a local Cuban drink of rum, lime, and sugar. Whatever its origin, no one disputes that the best daiquiris in Cuba were mixed by Constantino Ribalaigua, who presided over Havana's La Floridita bar from 1912 to 1952. Ernest Hemingway was a big fan of Constantino, who invented the *Papa Dobles* grapefruit daiquiri for him; Trader Vic Bergeron traveled from San Francisco to Havana just to watch Constantino make a daiquiri in person. No wonder La Floridita came to be known as "the cradle of the daiquiri." The German author Charles Schumann unearthed Constantino's recipe in his 1986 *Tropical Bar Book*.

—Jeff Berry



# La Floridita Daiquiri

1 ounce fresh lime juice  
1/4 ounce sugar syrup  
1/4 ounce Maraschino liqueur  
1 3/4 ounces white rum

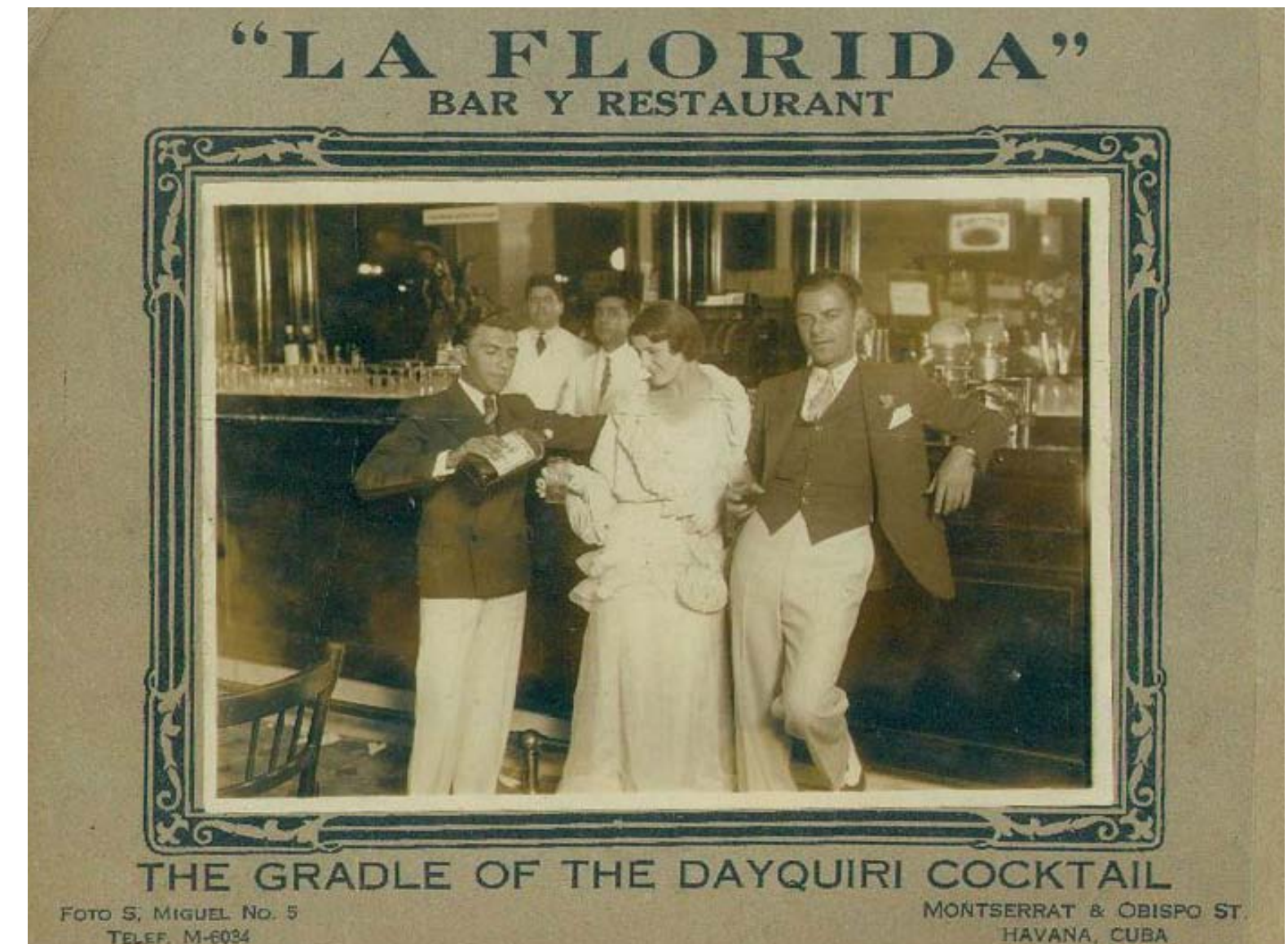
Shake well with a generous scoop of crushed ice.  
Strain into a pre-chilled cocktail glass.

**R I G H T :**  
La Florida founder  
Constantino Ribalaigua  
pours a drink for a chic  
Prohibition-era couple at  
his famous bar.



founded by Constantino Ribalaigua, who is credited with originating the frozen daiquiri in the 1930s. It was also famous for its fine cuisine served in the elegant surroundings of an ornate dining room that was popular with visitors such as British novelist Graham Greene.

Next door to La Floridita along Calle Montserrat remains Havana's oldest restaurant, La Zaragozana, which was established in 1830 as a Spanish bistro specializing in Galician stew. In 1955, the restaurant celebrated its 125th anniversary by opening "Rincon Aragonés," a re-creation of an ancient Spanish tavern







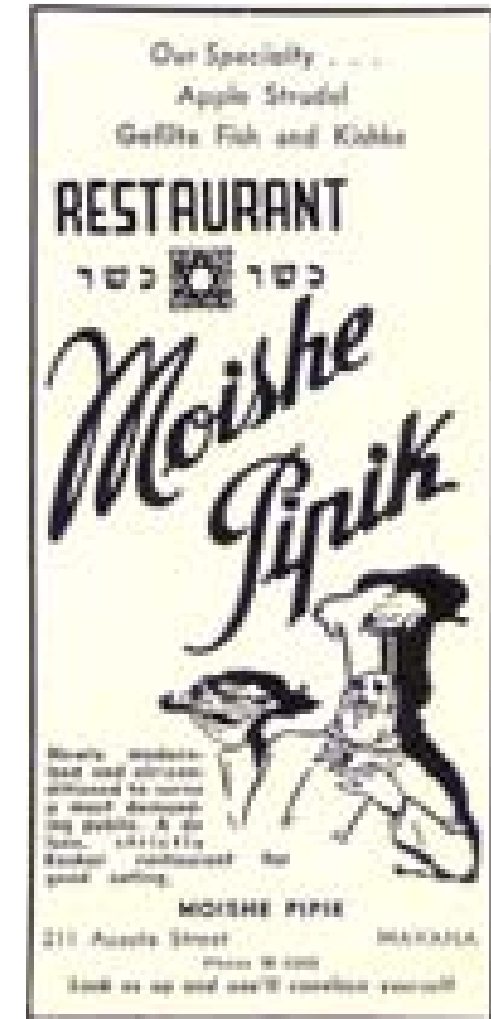
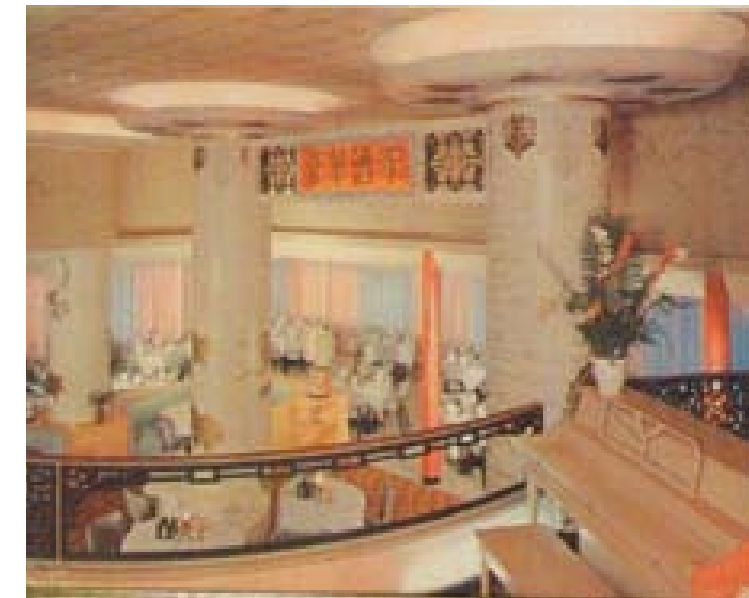
**A B O V E :**  
The Spanish La Zaragozana restaurant as depicted in 1955.

**R I G H T :**  
The restaurant in 2007.



**A B O V E   A N D  
R I G H T :**  
The Mandarin in Havana's swank Vedado district was "the most luxurious Chinese Restaurant in the Americas," according to its circa-1958 postcard.

**F A R   R I G H T**  
Had enough of rice, beans, and chicken? Try Moishe Pipik. It's strictly kosher.



dining room "decorated with real Spanish antiques and typical paintings where patrons feel as if in a fascinating corner of Old Spain." La Zaragozana, with its 1955 interior still intact, turned 175 in 2005.

In addition to dozens of Cuban, Spanish, and seafood restaurants, Havana also had Willie's Restaurant (American), the Mandarin (Chinese), Frascati (Italian), Restaurant Vienes (Viennese), and Moishe Pipik's Jewish Delicatessen. Topping all





non-Cuban influences, however, was that of France. In 1950s Havana a general rule was, if it's French, it must be classy. The majority of the city's top nighttime venues had French names, many with ornate furnishings to match. These included the big nightclubs—Montmartre, Sans Souci, and the Hotel Nacional's Club Parisienne—and numerous bars and restaurants such as Club Les Amants, El Palacio de Cristal (Crystal Palace), Dan Sima's Atelier Club, La Rue 19, Normandie, and L'aiglon Dining Room at the Havana Riviera. And featured at the air-conditioned Monseigneur (its restaurant open from noon to dawn) was a French violin ensemble "under the direction of Professor Pego"!

For those seeking "bohemian" Havana, there was (and is) La Bodeguita del Medio, a hole-in-the-wall where locals, tourists, and celebrities could safely go slumming. Also known as "La B del M" and located in Old Havana just down the

**ABOVE AND BELOW LEFT:** To this day Monseigneur, opposite the Hotel Nacional, remains a delicious reminder of Havana's midcentury obsession with all things French.

**BELOW RIGHT:** El Palacio de Cristal: "Delightful, exclusive, a corner of Paris in Havana," circa 1957.

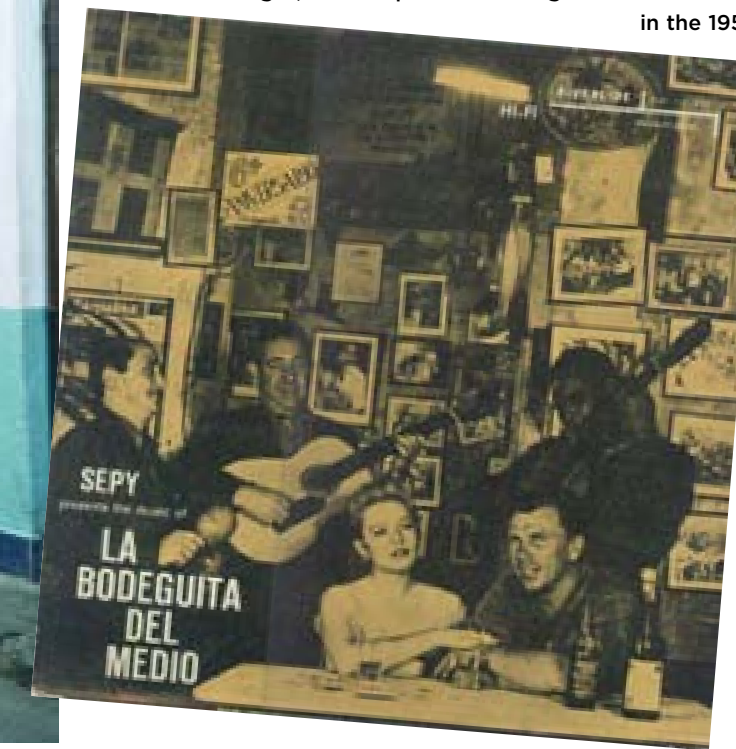


street from the venerable Hotel Ambos Mundos (where Ernest Hemingway once resided), the tavern started out in 1942 as Angel Martinez's small general store prior to its transformation into the celebrated down-market pub famous for its mojito cocktails. According to legend, the hard-drinking Hemingway remarked, "I take my mojitos at La Bodeguita and my daiquiris at La Floridita."

In creating La B del M, it took a raffish Hungarian expatriate named Sepy Dobronyi to convince owner Martinez to convert his store into a tavern in 1951. Sepy, a swarthy ex-fighter pilot, jewelry designer, metalworker, photographer, sculptor, painter, and skin diver, was "the dynamic force that [kept] La

**LEFT:** "La B del M," mojito central, in 2007.

**BELOW:** It was the raffish Hungarian expatriate Sepy (lower right) who inspired La Bodeguita's bohemian reputation in the 1950s.





# Mojito

The mojito is the drink of the moment: It's served in trendy bars and restaurants; it's sold premixed in bottles by big liquor conglomerates; and it's even the star of its own commercial, in which an impossibly handsome bartender muddles a mojito in time to the techno beat of a hip nightclub. One might be forgiven for assuming that the mojito is a new drink, but it first came to fame at La Bodeguita del Medio over fifty years ago. The Havana bar was to the mojito what La Floridita was to the daiquiri. Errol Flynn and Nat King Cole were La Bodeguita fans, as were Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Fidel's patronage may account for the fact that the bar survived his revolution and is still serving mojitos to busloads of foreign tourists today. The cocktail historian Wayne Curtis, who dubbed La Bodeguita "Havana's mojito mecca" in his 2006 book, *And A Bottle Of Rum: A History Of The New World In Ten Cocktails*, offers the authentic recipe.

—Jeff Berry

## Mojito

6 freshly washed mint leaves  
2 teaspoons bar sugar  
3/4 ounce fresh lime juice  
2 ounces good aged rum  
Soda water

Muddle the mint, sugar, and lime juice in a tall glass. Add rum. Fill glass with ice. Top with soda. Garnish with mint sprigs.



### RIGHT

Havana remains a city of music with talented performers appearing in most bars, hotels, and restaurants.

### BELOW:

Dos Hermanos Bar in Old Havana has been serving drinks for over a hundred years.

Bodeguita the center of Cuban bohemia," according to liner notes from a high-fidelity LP that Sepy produced in 1957. The album, recorded in La B del M's back room, featured the tavern's popular musical trio. "Two guitars and maracas, together with three blending voices, provide the very listenable, extremely melodic background for dining, talking and living a la Bodeguita," states the record's liner notes, which continue, "Sepy has recently gained worldwide fame and notoriety through his celebrated nude statues in gold of Anita Ekberg and Jayne Mansfield. Besides rocking international art centers, his sculpting earned Sepy a very widely publicized sock in the nose from Anita's husband." Indeed, Sepy's reputation would follow him to Miami after the revolution, where, at his Coconut Grove bachelor pad, several of Linda Lovelace's notorious



sex scenes in the X-rated hit *Deep Throat* were shot in 1972.

Near the piers and docks of Havana Vieja (Old Havana) were dozens of bars catering to sailors, stevedores, and anyone else wandering the area day or night. Among these, the Bar Dos Hermanos (Two Brothers Bar), already an institution by 1905, survives today with its long wooden bar and mirrored shelves of bottled rum.

Because Havana has always been a city of music, one didn't need to go far to be part of the scene. At almost every bar and restaurant was at least a *conjunto* (small musical group) performing traditional Afro-Cuban songs and popular American standards. For a city its size, Havana had perhaps the greatest number of talented musicians on earth.

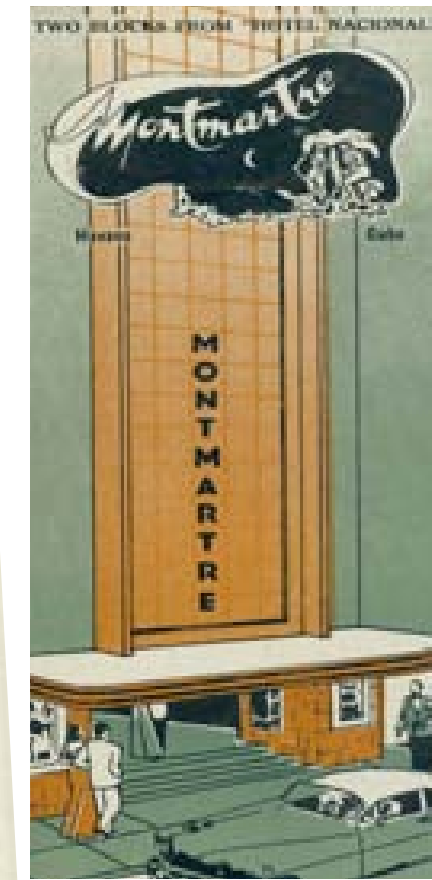


## Nightclubs and Cabarets

In the 1950s, Havana was the nightclub capital of the world. And atop Havana's nightclub pyramid were the Big Three: Montmartre, Sans Souci, and, at the apex, the fabulous Tropicana. Cuba's best musicians, dancers, and singers performed at the Big Three, where the pay and the prestige were the highest. These venues, which could seat over a thousand guests, were sprawling, multilayered affairs with cocktail lounges, full-service dinner menus, vast dance floors, one or two orchestras, dazzling cabaret revues, gift shops, and casinos. They put on two big shows a night, with the last performance often ending at 3:00 a.m. It was a labor-intensive business that provided work for many hundreds of Habaneros—the Tropicana alone employed over four hundred. In addition to the dozens of performers, there were waiters and waitresses, cooks, bartenders, costumers, stagehands,

lighting technicians, croupiers, cashiers, cigarette girls, valets, janitors, and gardeners as well as the back-office business functions of bookkeeping and payroll. The clubs employed publicists and marketing men who created splashy ads for local and international magazines, touting big-name talent, as well as bus tour and convention coordinators. And there were kickbacks to be paid to tour operators, cabdrivers, hotel concierges, and the local politicians and police.

For the typical American, a visit to a Havana nightclub in 1958 was utterly transforming—an invitation to a forbidden, hedonistic world of rum, rumba, and roulette—and for many, an experience of a lifetime. It was the reason that tourists came to Cuba. Indeed, Havana's heady mix of tropical exoticism, sensual overload, and rum-fueled abandon existed nowhere else. Long before Las Vegas achieved its status as the premier playground for grown-ups, there was Havana. Because, back then, what happened in Havana stayed in Havana.



## Montmartre

With its 1930s Streamline Moderne interior, Montmartre was situated on the third floor of a block-long neoclassical building in the heart of Havana's stylish Vedado district within walking distance of the hotels Nacional, Vedado, and the Habana Hilton. Montmartre's big fifty-person stage show, "Medianoche en Paris" ("Midnight in Paris"), starred the incandescent bombshells Zenia and Carlisse Novo, whose swivel-hipped dance routines set male audience members on fire. More sedate acts that were nonetheless crowd pleasers starred Maurice Chevalier and Dorothy Lamour, among many other popular performers. Typically there were three top-rated headliners whose performances rotated at any one time at Montmartre. As one of the big nightclubs that predated Batista's 1952 coup d'état, the Montmartre, along with Sans Souci and Tropicana, had casino gambling to complement an





evening of dining, dancing, and floor shows. Under the skillful management of Meyer Lansky, the nightclub’s opulent casino boasted a clientele of American high rollers and high-ranking Cuban officials. In fact, it was Montmartre’s fame as a magnet for Batista’s top brass that led to the nightspot’s targeting by members of the Cuban revolutionary underground. Late one evening in October 1956, as he was leaving the nightclub, the chief of the country’s feared intelligence service, Colonel Antonio Blanco Rico, was assassinated and several bystanders injured in a fusillade of bullets.



**FAR LEFT:**  
Montmartre’s casino.

**LEFT:**  
The voluptuous Zenia.

**ABOVE:**  
The shuttered Montmartre as it looked in 2007 after suffering a major fire.



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:**  
Sans Souci advertisement; a few of Sans Souci’s famous guest performers; enjoying the indoor show; Sans Souci’s remodeled entrance.

**BELOW:**  
Caption TK?

## Sans Souci

The second of the Big Three nightclubs, Sans Souci was located outside of central Havana in the leafy suburban country club section of the city. Opened in the 1920s, Sans Souci (French for “without care”) was an indoor-outdoor nightclub consisting of a one-story Spanish hacienda-style building with arched openings, low-slung red-tile roofs, and a main stage situated under the stars amidst tropical landscaping. Its brochure invited you to “stroll in the starlit night through the sweet-scented, romantic gardens that surround Sans Souci. Dance outdoors



beneath a Latin moon to the languid music of two top orchestras.” Seated at your ringside table, you would “enjoy the sheer luxury of perfect, potent cocktails and a delicious dinner in this magic atmosphere.” Over the years, featured Sans Souci performers included Tony Martin, Dorothy Dandridge, Harry Belafonte, Edith Piaf, Marlene Dietrich, Cab Calloway, Tony Bennett, Sarah Vaughn, Liberace, and Cuba’s own Celia Cruz and Benny Moré.

But at the Sans Souci, as with all of Havana’s major nightclubs, it was the profits derived from the casino that paid the bills. In Cuba, this was facilitated by club owners leasing out the establishment’s casino





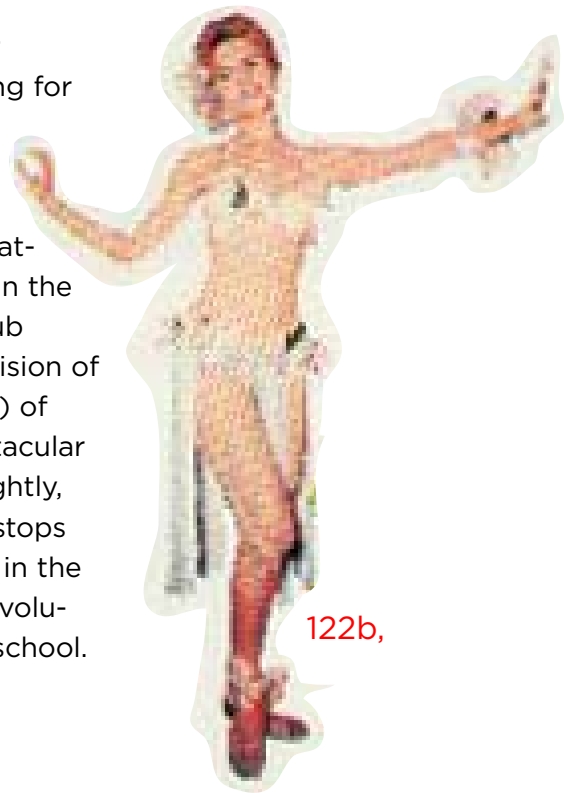
to an independent operator for a large fee and often taking a cut of the nightly take. At the Montmartre, Meyer Lansky held the club's gambling concession. For the winter season of 1951-52, Norman Rothman was the lessee of the Sans Souci's gaming tables—the season when the future of Havana's casinos was put in jeopardy by Rothman himself.

In April 1952, Dana C. Smith, an American tourist from California, lost \$4,200 playing a crooked dice game known as razzle-dazzle at Rothman's Sans Souci casino. Smith, suspecting that he'd been cheated, stopped payment on a check he'd written to the casino to cover his losses. Cheekily, Norman Rothman sued Smith in a U.S. court to recover the funds. But Dana C. Smith was no ordinary tourist. He was a well-connected California attorney who upped the ante by loudly complaining about the incident to his close friend Senator (and soon-to-be vice president) Richard Nixon. With evidence provided by a helpful State Department, Smith proved that Havana's casinos were rife with crooked games, easily winning the case. The *Saturday Evening Post* got hold of the story and wrote a scathing investigative piece documenting how gullible Americans were being systematically fleeced at Cuba's casinos. The article concluded that only at the Montmartre, with its casino under the professional supervision of "mobster" Meyer Lansky, would a tourist find clean games of chance. President Batista, recognizing the damage that the story would have on Cuban tourism, quickly arrested and deported the razzle-dazzle scam artists. In addition, he hired Lansky as the government's advisor on



gambling reform to certify to the outside world that the games were on the up-and-up. Just as with Las Vegas, it was the mob that gamblers trusted to run a genuine game, and Meyer Lansky had built his career on that reputation. Following the razzle-dazzle debacle, shadowy Tampa, Florida-based gangster Santo Trafficante Jr. took over active control of the Sans Souci and, à la Lansky, kept his casino clean.

Several years later, Trafficante attempted to emulate the huge success of the Sans Souci's main rival, the dazzling Tropicana, by investing in a million-dollar expansion of his nightclub. Guests arriving for the 1956-57 season found the Sans Souci's previous outdoor stage replaced by multilevel circular platforms, each carrying elaborately costumed singers and dancers gyrating to the sounds of a live orchestra. To bring in the high rollers, Trafficante placed his enlarged Club Room casino under the well-publicized supervision of famed gambler "Lefty" Clark (William Bischoff) of Miami. With its big new casino and two "Spectacular Revues" that could seat over two thousand nightly, the Sans Souci became one of the obligatory stops for the popular "Night on the Town" bus tours in the last years of Batista's dictatorship. After the revolution, the swank Sans Souci became a military school.



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**A B O V E :**  
Sans Souci's spectacular new multilevel outdoor stage in 1957.

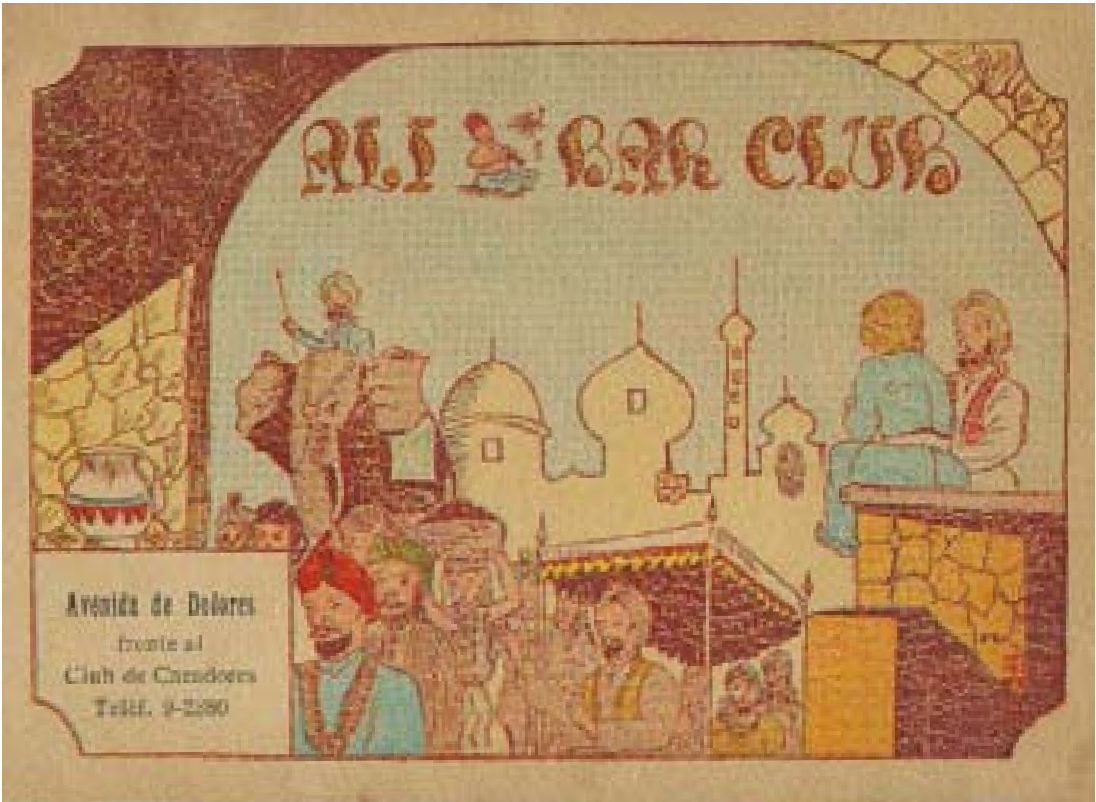
**R I G H T :**  
Sans Souci *modelos* in "hats and diamonds" costumes.





Hotel Nightclubs

Following the passage of Batista’s Hotel Law 2074 in 1955, which provided tax breaks and financing for new hotel/casino investments, each of Havana’s big new American-owned hotels boasted its own magnificent showroom, cocktail lounge, fine restaurant, and casino. Modeled after Miami’s Eden Roc and Fontainebleau and Las Vegas’s mobbed-up Flamingo and Sands hotels, Havana’s versions were just as brassy. Santo Trafficante’s Hotel Capri had its deluxe showroom adjacent to the Casino de Capri. At Lansky’s Havana Riviera, it was the Copa Room that brought in the crowds. The enormous Habana Hilton inaugurated its spacious El Caribe supper club in 1958. And the remodeled Hotel Nacional’s Club Parisienne had two nightly cabaret shows that rivaled the Big Three in theatricality.



Havana’s Other Nightclubs and Cabarets

As was true in nightclub scenes in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Paris, and elsewhere, there were the big, expensive and, by necessity, overly sanitized establishments where the cabarets’ perceived vulgarity had been tamed for the tourist crowd. And then there were all the rest—the smaller, smoke-filled, densely packed clubs where the musicians, singers, and dancers were unrestrained. In Havana it was indeed in the dozens of smaller nightclub/cabarets located throughout the central city and suburbs where the cabaret as a musical genre evolved through experimentation and improvisation. It was where the musicians and the crowd could

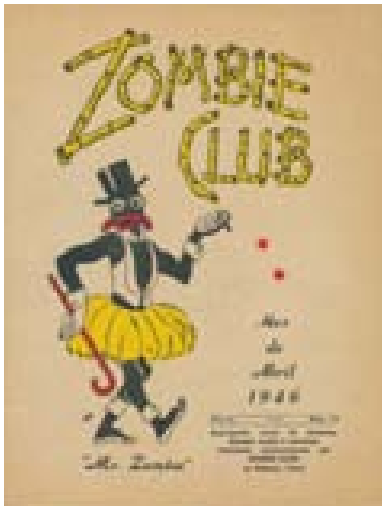
LEFT:  
Rudy and his partner in 1952

ABOVE:  
The legendary Ali Bar Club  
where Beny Moré became a  
star.

FACING, LEFT:  
Casablanca’s second show  
started at 3:00 a.m.

FACING, CENTER:  
A glittering dance team  
between shows.

FACING, RIGHT:  
Mr. Zombie welcomes you in  
1946.



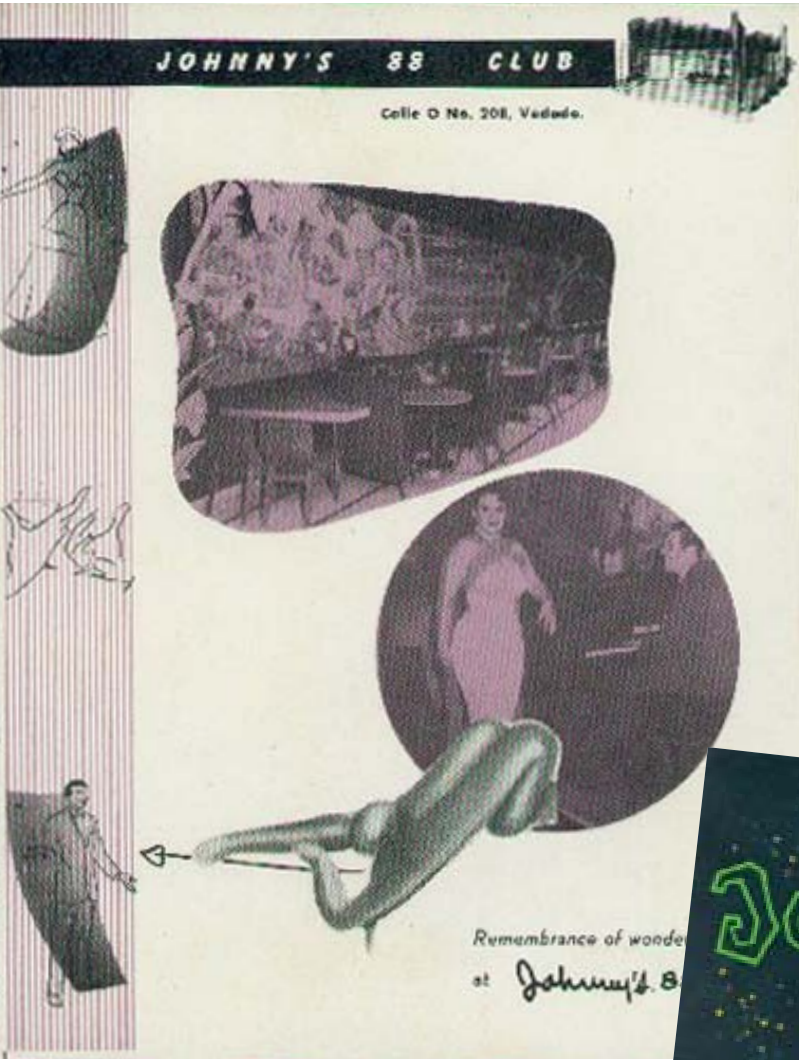
really swing. In the process, what filtered down from the Big Three to the second tier were the cabarets’ elaborate costumes and choreography; what bubbled up were the musical innovations—the music’s soul—that kept the high-end clubs from ossifying into boring repetition.

It was at the local clubs where performers were free to experiment and Habaneros could identify and nurture upcoming stars. One example was the Ali Bar on the city’s outskirts where, in the early 1950s, Beny Moré’s legendary performances led to his being crowned “El Barbaro del Ritmo” (“the Barbarian of Rhythm”) as he became Cuba’s biggest star. Others were scattered throughout the city, such as Casablanca and the Zombie Club near the Prado, and the Cabaret Pennsylvania, Panchin, and Rumba Palace out near the ocean in Marianao. Johnny’s



Dream Club was located in Marianao, not far from the Tropicana. In addition to the Ali Bar there were other clubs situated along Rancho Boyeros Road out of town toward the airport, including Club Bambu, Topeka, Mulgoba, and Night and Day. In Havana's sophisticated Vedado district one found Johnny's 88 Club (under the same management as Johnny's Dream Club), Havana 1900 Nightclub, Mocambo, 21 Club, Club Las Vegas, and the Turf Club.

As in cities throughout Latin America and the world at that time, many of Havana's nightclubs were racially segregated, with those that were almost exclusively white and those that were frequented primarily by mulattoes and blacks—although whites could often be found at the black clubs in pursuit of the most “authentic” of the city's scenes. Additionally, there were small neighborhood clubs where all races generally mixed.



LEFT TO RIGHT:  
The 21 Club featured “exotic décor”; Johnny's 88 Club and Johnny's Dream Club were popular local hangouts.

FACING:  
Jumping for joy at Club Bambu.



For Havana's cabaret performers, as with such artists everywhere, their lives were nocturnal. With nightclubs letting out at 3:00 and 4:00 a.m. it was common for musicians, singers, and dancers to unwind at small restaurants and bars that wouldn't close until 8:00 a.m.—and not reopen until well after dark. As an all-encompassing way of life and as a means of earning a living, being a cabaret performer left little time for contemplating politics. For many, the revolutionary victory of 1959 came as a surprise. Soon, however, the new regime made it clear that

cabaret life was equated with the decadence of the Batista years, seeing it as unhealthy and unrevolutionary. Not only were the Big Three purged of their racier aspects, but the small neighborhood cabarets were also targeted and most of them dwindled away. The result was that by cleansing cabaret of its perceived depravity, the government ended up destroying much of what made Havana unique and alive. Only in recent years has the genre begun to reemerge as Cuba moves to embrace the totality of its cultural heritage.



You've been reading an excerpt from:

# *Havana* Before CASTRO

When Cuba Was a Tropical Playground

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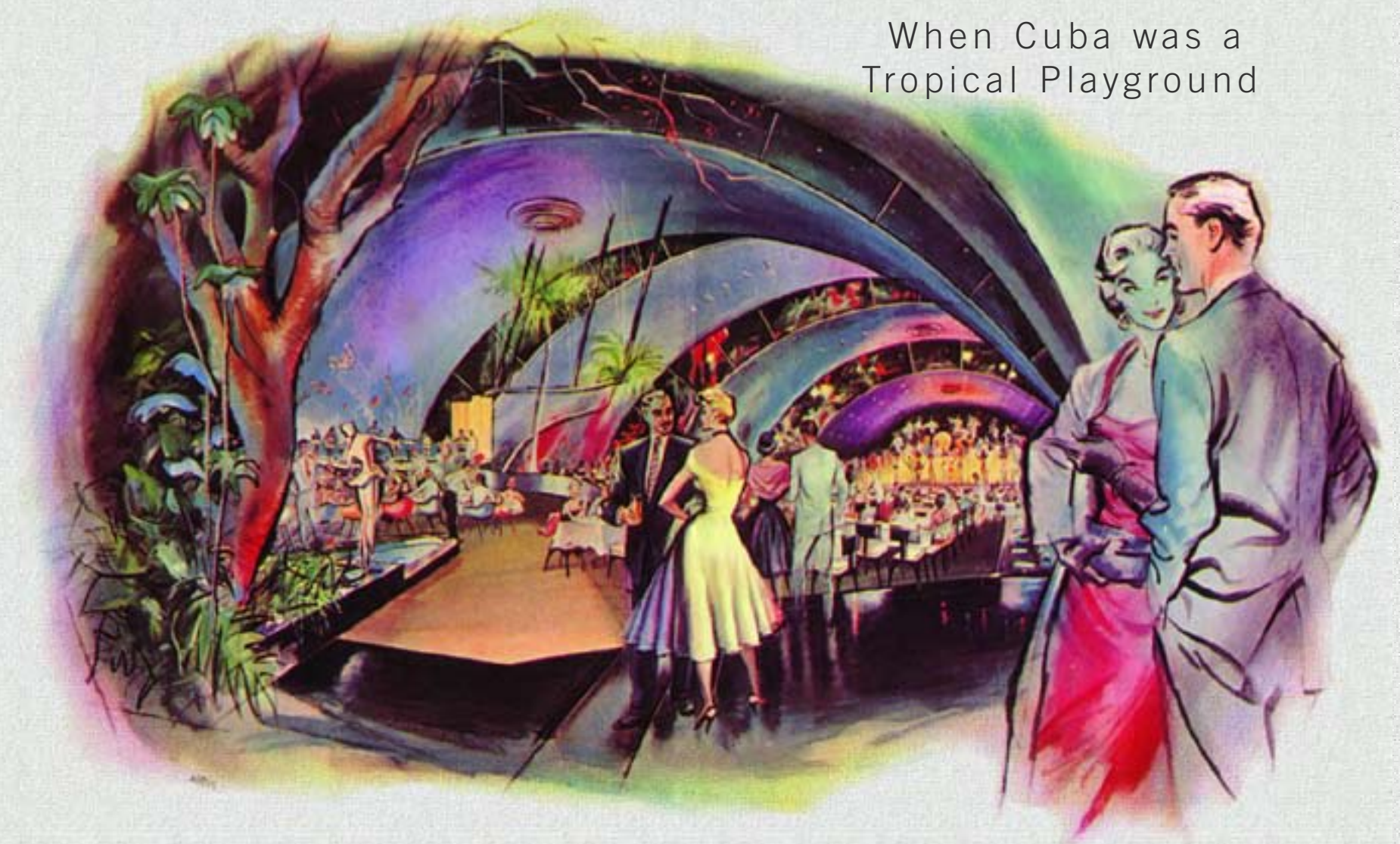
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