

# Breaking an ancient taboo

**The crowd was amazed when the three Cuban women walked onto the stage carrying the sacred drums only men were allowed to play.**

**By Bill Strubbe**



**N**ever before had an all-woman music group played at the music festival in Mantanza, Cuba. Obini Bata made history when they became the first.

When women musicians Obini Bata walked out on stage carrying three familiar drums, the audience was shocked. Until then obini (women) were not allowed to play the bata (the special drums of the Afro-Cuban religion called Santeria).

The tambor bata had never before been heard outside of religious ceremonies and, even more of a sin, the drums were being touched by the hands of women! But, by the time the performance finished, the hall was filled with cheers. The stage was showered with flowers, and famous musicians came back stage to congratulate Obini Bata.

The all-woman group was started by Deborah Mendez, a trained dancer who performed classical Latin American dance, like the rhumba, bolero and tango with Cuba's National Folklorico Dance Company for 25 years.

Five years ago, she asked other performers and friends Eva Despaigne and Mirta Ocanto to make a daring cultural and religious break by forming the band Obini Bata and playing the sacred drums.

"Santeria is an important part of Cuban culture with its roots in Africa," explained Deborah. "In Cuba the drums have always been considered important in religion, but were never seen as cultural music. We wanted to take this out of the religious setting. When the audience sees the drums they believe it will be religious music, but are surprised when we begin playing."

At first, the three determined women came up against much resistance. Several teachers refused to teach the women drumming. Eva, the group's director, said: "One male teacher who had helped us left his job because others objected to him teaching us."

Later the group found out that the teachers taught drumming to several foreign women who paid them in United States dollars.

Obini Bata's main instruments are the tambor bata, the three drums used at Santeria religious ceremonies.

Carried in the hearts and memories of slaves brought to Cuba more than a 100 years ago, the music of the tambor bata brings back the rhythms of speech in the African villages. Like a conversation with six hands, the drums speak a beautiful and mysterious language. The voice is believed to

Photo: Bill Strubbe



**A first for Cuba, Obini Bata, from left to right: Eva Despaigne, Deborah Mendez and Mirta Ocanto**

call down the orishas (spirits) to communicate with human beings.

Deborah plays the *iyá* (the mother), which is the largest of the three drums. The *iyá* is very demanding and tiring to play because it leads the other two.

Mirta Ocanto plays the medium-sized drum, the *itotele*. The small drum, the *okonkolo*, is played by Eva, who is also the main singer. Traditionally, for one week before playing at a religious ceremony, male drummers are not allowed to have sex, and bathe with special herbs. It is also believed that the drums' spirit become weak if a woman touches them, because of her monthly period. The group say this is nonsense.

**"T**he drum is like a child and female hands are also effective. The important thing is to feel the drum. If this bond is not there, no matter how much one wants to play, it will not be possible," said Deborah.

"Traditionally, men sit when playing the drums and sing in a very rough manner. We decided to change the style. We play standing, add more movement and sing with more passion."

Obini Bata often finds work in the tourist hotels

in Cuba and at private parties. But, with food and other goods shortages, Havana's electricity black-outs, and an unclear political future, life in Cuba is difficult. "We hope things will be better for us soon," Deborah said.

The women told a story which went against the sexist view of centuries that women can't play these drums. "We were invited to play at a party and while we were playing, four people were possessed by orishas (spirits). In a way we were surprised, but pleased. It caused conflict because our drums are not the "sacred" drums, therefore they are not supposed to be able to call down the orishas, but they did. Of course, some people said the people were pretending to be possessed."

What seems clear is that, if women playing drums are able to call down the orishas, then the taboo against women drummers at religious functions has to be looked at again.

Santeria priests were against the women playing the drums but the three women feel they are slowly being accepted. As a result of Obini Bata's courage and talent, the enchanting beat of the *tambor bata* can now be heard at the hands of several other female groups in Cuba. ♀