

produced & directed by Lorenzo DeStefano
executive producers - Randa Haines & Sandra Levinson

DOC EXPLORES UNSUNG CHAPTER IN CUBA'S RICH MUSICAL HISTORY

by Laura Emerick

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★★★★

They should have called this one "Get Out Your Handkerchiefs." Director Lorenzo DeStefano's salute to Los Zafiros, often referred to as "The Beatles of Cuba," will jerk the tears out of the most stony-eyed, even if they've never heard of the group before.

Outside Cuba and the Cuban-American community, not many have. In the early '60s, against the backdrop of the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis, Los Zafiros (The Sapphires) glittered on the international scene. Fusing doo-wop, calypso, samba, soul and pop with traditional Latin styles, including son, mambo and rumba, the vocal quintet became Cuba's biggest stars.

But like many pop idols, Los Zafiros soared Icarus-like toward the sun, then crashed back to earth. Though the group toured Europe, performing at Paris' famed Olympia with the actual Beatles in the audience, Los Zafiros was cut off from the rest of the world as the American embargo tightened the noose around Cuba. By 1972, with personal tensions mounting, the group began to collapse; it disbanded in 1975. "Los Zafiros: Music From the Edge of Time," whose subtitle refers to the first decade of the Cuban communist era, attempts to restore the luster to the legend.

The documentary builds on renewed interest in Cuban music, spurred in part by the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon. Nick Gold, head of World Circuit Records and one of the BVSC masterminds, helped to reintroduce Los Zafiros to a new generation with "Bossa Cubana" (1999), an anthology of the group's hits. For his documentary, DeStefano enlists Gold and other Latin music advocates as he and his cameras follow the two remaining Zafiros on a sentimental journey into the past.

The journey begins in Havana's tough Cayo Hueso neighborhood, where teenagers Miguel "Miguelito" Cancio and Leoncio "Kike" Morua grew up. Inspired by their love of American music, they decide to form a group and recruit Ignacio Elejalde, Eduardo Elio Hernandez ("El Chino") and later music director Manuel Galban, whose distinctive echoey electric guitar riffs anchored their sound. Searching for a suitable name, Cancio comes up with Los Zafiros, after his



Los Zafiros, Moscow 1965

talisman-like sapphire ring, which he obtained in a real-life fairy tale of sorts: a drunken man sold it to him for literally a song outside a club late one night.

Quickly Los Zafiros become the toast of Havana, with a tropical-cocktail style unlike anything ever heard before; their minor-key harmonies sound almost supernatural. Combining crisply choreographed moves and matching suits, a la Little Anthony and the Imperials, they seem almost subversive in Castro's khaki-colored Cuba. Indeed, their existence rests on a paradox: they embrace a distinctly American sound just as the United States seals off their homeland from the world.

Therein lies the tragedy that triggers the flood of tears unleashed by "Music From the Edge of Time." Three of Los Zafiros die young: Ignacio at 37 of a brain hemorrhage in 1981, Kike in 1983 of cirrhosis and "El Chino" at 56 of alcohol abuse and other ailments in 1995.

In 1993, Cancio leaves Cuba to join the exile community in Florida. Galban remains in Havana and continues to record with other groups (including the Buena Vista Social Club projects; his latest disc, "Mambo Sinuendo," a collaboration with Ry Cooder, marks another career renaissance). But he still considers his stint with Los Zafiros as the "best part of his life."

In "Music From the Edge of Time," Cancio and Galban poignantly revisit their old haunts, from Havana's storied Egrem Studios, where they recorded their hits, to the clubs where they once performed. Along the way, other Cuban performers give testimonials on camera, intercut with archival

footage of Los Zafiros in their prime. In a series of tearful reunions, they look up the families of their fallen comrades. At one point, El Chino's brother, violinist Jorge Hernandez Mora, attempts to play one of their songs and stops after a few bars, overcome with emotion. "I can't go on," he sobs.

Later Galban reflects, "I hated seeing them [Ignacio, Kike and El Chino] the way they were at the end. They never grew up. They were always just kids. But they had good hearts. They were born to sing. They just didn't know how to live."

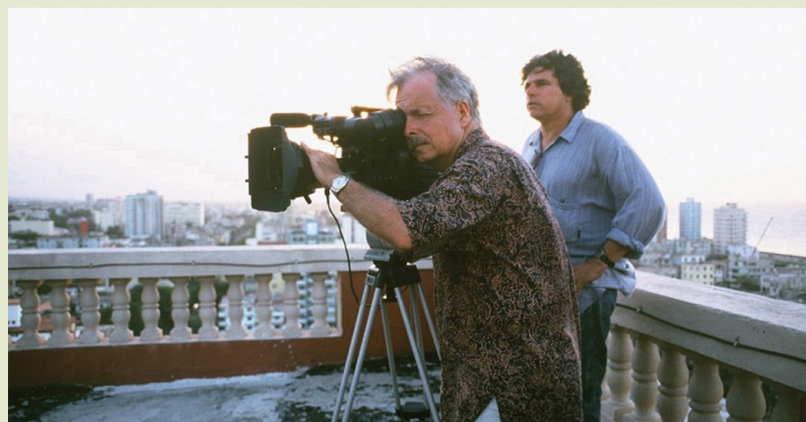
That statement, however, and other provocative comments go by unchallenged. In general, the complex personal, social and political elements

that factored into Los Zafiros' rise and fall are implied rather than illuminated. For instance, Cancio touches on the issue of Cuba's racial divide when he offhandedly notes that they almost called themselves Los Fakires (The Sheiks) but decided against it, because the image of "four mulattos wearing turbans would not be appropriate."

But what the documentary lacks in analysis, it more than makes up for with emotion. In Varadero, Kike's sea side home, Cancio and Galban eat lobster, drink and sing on the beach. Afterward, they stand silently while looking across the bay. "I live over there, in Florida," Cancio finally notes, motioning to his home across the sea. Speaking volumes in just two words, Galban quietly replies: "I know."

Their story is not all sadness. In one scene, they're accosted in a park by fans, who break into "Un Nombre de Mujer (Ofelia)," one of Los Zafiros' hits. Everyone knows the words, even the little kids in the crowd: "Alo, 'alo, 'alo/Ese soy yo/Ofelia." In another transcendent scene, Cancio joins Galban in a chorus of "Mi Oracion" (Los Zafiros' version of the Platters' "My Prayer") while the tapes roll once again at Egrem. As Cancio launches into the opening line, "cuando llega la luz," the years melt away.

Here once again, DeStefano affirms the power of music to unite disparate people in a common bond. His documentary gracefully salutes an unsung chapter of Latin music history from an era that existed "on the edge of time."



Thomas Ackerman (dir. of photography) and Lorenzo DeStefano (producer/director) (L-R) - Havana

ORLANDO WEEKLY FILM REVIEW

by Steve Schneider - March 2003

Stepping into the dancing shoes of "The Buena Vista Social Club" and "Standing in the Shadows of Motown," Los Zafiros sets out to validate another decades-old musical legacy. World music, the movie asserts, may have begun with the title group ("The Sapphires"), a Cuban vocal/instrumental combo of the early 1960s that blended native, American, Latin and African sounds. The act became a national treasure and even toured Europe before coming apart in the 1970s.

The movie is structured around a reunion of surviving members Manuel Galban and Miguel Cancio, the latter taking his first steps on Cuban soil since emigrating to the U.S. in the early 1990s. The shadow of political isolation hangs over the ensuing travelogue, in which the reunited partners visit old haunts and swap recollections of how sweet life was when they were harmonizing kings.

The doc doesn't exactly shy away from the illness and alcoholism that helped splinter the group, but neither does it dissect those tragedies in detail. A few dots remain unconnected as director DeStefano instead dazzles us with indigenous beauty -- dig that incredibly blue Cuban water! -- and solicits locals of all ages and backgrounds to testify to just how great the group was.

Nevertheless, there's something reassuring and proudly Latin about Los Zafiros' enduring, cross-generational appeal. Notice also how many of the emotionally charged meetings between Galban, Cancio and other of their erstwhile musical collaborators lead to apparently spontaneous outbursts of melody. All other things being equal, Los Zafiros and their disciples obviously communicate best through music. It's a timely reminder that shared culture can be more than just a consumer product.



Bernardo "Chori" Garcia, Miguel Cancio, Manuel Galban, Roberto Garcia and Orlando "Cachaite" Lopez (L-R) - Egrem Studios, Havana