



WOMAN ON THE DRUMS YISSY GARCÍA LEADS A NEW GENERATION OF CUBAN MUSICIANS

Written By Fernando Gonzalez
April 2, 2024 at 12:47 AM



Yissy García, shown in the photo above in a 2018 concert with BandanCHA at the Fabrica de Arte Cubano, a multidisciplinary space in Havana, Cuba, headlines Women on the Drums at Miami Beach Bandshell on Saturday, April 6. (Photo courtesy of Larisa López)

Yissy García was a child — but she knew she was not on board with the family plan.

The daughter of Bernardo García, a much-respected drummer who was a charter member of the fabled group Irakere and part of trumpeter Arturo Sandoval's group, Yissy was being nudged into, perhaps, becoming a dancer. Her older brother, Omar, would be a drummer.



Yissy García with BandanCHA at Jazz al Parque, in Bogotá, Colombia in 2023. (Photo courtesy of Valentina Castro)

“So, my mom would take me to dance and gymnastics classes — and I didn’t like *any* of that,” she says, chuckling at the memory in a recent conversation in Spanish. “I was born and grew up in Cayo Hueso, a very musical neighborhood in Havana where there’s always rumba going on somewhere. I lived near the Callejón de Hamel (a legendary rumba place and cultural landmark). In the park across the street from my house, there was a rumba gathering every Sunday, and I would go.

García says she would take two sticks with her and play along.

“My brother was the opposite. He liked to go to dance classes. He was always involved in that world,” she recalls. “So, I told my parents that I wanted to study drums. I wanted to be a drummer. I was about eight years old. And my parents said, ‘Well, if you are serious about it, let’s enroll you in the conservatory, and let’s see.’ ” (Her brother became a dancer and is now a choreographer in Mexico.)

Nineteen years of formal music education, mainly focusing on classical percussion, followed by five years with the all-women group Anacaona, which became García’s on-the-job postgrad Cuban music academy, was the foundation for one of the most intriguing drummers, composers, and bandleaders to emerge in Cuba in the past decade.



Yissy García, a composer and drummer, is one of the most powerful artists of a new generation of Cuban musicians. (Photo by Daniela de la Portilla, courtesy of FUNDArte)

Now based in Miami, García, 36, will lead Bandancha in concert for “Women on the Drums” at the Miami Beach Bandshell on Saturday, April 6.

She is a musical player with an exact time and a composer’s ear for structure, colors, and dynamics. So, after accumulating awards and making her mark with international and leading Cuban artists, it was time to organize her own band. García founded Bandancha in 2012, and it has been an ever-evolving group (it once included a trumpet and a turntablist and rapper), playing an ever-evolving blend of jazz, African styles and rhythms, funk, electronics, and Cuban music.

“I like to keep the roots, the essence, but I need to change,” she says, explaining her approach to her music. “I’m super restless. I like to constantly listen — to pop music, electronic music, and Caribbean music. I want to know what is sounding out there in the street. When it comes to composing, that nourishes me a lot.”

For García, music continues to evolve.



In Bogota at Jazz al Parque in 2023, Yissy García gets her groove on. (Photo courtesy of Valentina Castro)

“I’m working now with a percussionist who spent many years living in Angola and knows a lot about African culture,” she says. “So we are already mixing rhythms and instruments, using different sonorities, and that’s the kind of thing that keeps the spark alive for me; it keeps me active, wanting to compose and create music.”

For “Women on the Drums,” García and BandanCHA will revisit the group’s repertoire and present the new lineup — Alberto Torres, on guitar; Jorge Pérez, on piano and synthesizers; and Yasmane Santos, percussion — augmented for the occasion by several guests, including pianist Glenda del Monte, vocalists Kelvis Ochoa, Miriam Martínez and Sheena (Yoana Álvarez), Brazilian multi-instrumentalist Munir Hossn, percussionist and vocalist Brenda Navarrete, percussionists Yuya Rodriguez, Yarelis Gandul, Daymi Jaime, and Gilma Ospina and dancer Katia Aislen.

Rather than a personal celebration, the little girl who just wanted to be a drummer (and has been driving the music and the band from her drum seat for some time now) has turned “Women on the Drums” into a celebration of women in music and dance.



“Things have been changing, but at one time, in Cuba, percussion was played only by men,” she says matter-of-factly. “A woman playing a *tumbadora* (conga) or a drum kit was not well regarded — and the same thing happened with other instruments, such as the trumpet or the double bass. But now, in the conservatories in Cuba, many girls are studying percussion. You find female folkloric groups with women playing batá drums (two-headed hourglass-shaped drums) and tumbadoras. Things are changing — not only in Cuba but around the world. For five years, I’ve been on the jury for Hit Like a Girl (an international contest for female and gender non-conforming drummers). I’ve seen girl drummers from India, Russia, and countries you can’t imagine.”



(WATCH: Yissy García & Bandancha: 2018 NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert)

She says that Miami is a mecca, too.

“I had a clear idea of the format I wanted for this concert,” says Garcia. “But when FUNDarte (the show’s presenting organization) suggested the name, a spark went off: This is a good opportunity to invite women percussionists, singers, instrumentalists, and dancers. There are a lot of talented women in Miami. It’s going to be a magical night.”

WHAT: *Women on the Drums featuring Yissy & Bandancha with opening act Marypaz & Electro-Percussion*

WHERE: *Miami Beach Bandshell, 7275 Collins Ave., Miami Beach*

WHEN: *8 p.m. Saturday, April 6*

COST: *\$36.05, seated general admission, \$267.80, Club Level box, which includes up to 6 tickets*

INFORMATION: *786-453-2897, FUNDarte.us and miamibeachbandshell.com*

ArtburstMiami.com is a nonprofit media source for the arts featuring fresh and original stories by writers dedicated to theater, dance, visual arts, film, music and more. Don’t miss a story at www.artburstmiami.com.