Between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s rap music and hip hop culture surged in popularity in Cuba. Performing groups formed and reformed, recordings circulated on cassette and CD, performance spaces sprang up, and rap festivals and hip hop conferences were held—while Havana hip hoppers drew inspiration from the original, hard-edged sounds of politically conscious rap music that had come out of the Bronx back in the late 1970s and early 1980s. There was a palpable sense of urgency and energy in Havana surrounding this newly embraced genre with its promise of street-level creativity. North American rappers took notice of these developments in Havana, as did international journalists, academics, filmmakers, music producers, and cultural tourists. Harry Belafonte visited Cuba in 1999 and had an all-day conversation with Castro in which he extolled the potential of hip hop as a force for progressive social change. The New York-based Black August Hip Hop Collective reached out to their counterparts in Havana, seeking collaboration and offering ideological solidarity. More than two dozen documentary films about Havana hip hop were made—by filmmakers from outside Cuba—within a ten-year time span! The Cuban government established the Agencia Cubana de Rap as an official organization to promote rap music and to integrate it within the larger national culture. And all of this occurred within the context of the “Special Period” of Cuba’s economic crisis due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Havana’s hip hop fervor reached its peak around 2000, and then within a few years the importance of hip hop waned, the scene shrunk, a number of key artists left the island, and the far more commercial, danceable, and some would say, shallow style of reggaeton rose to prominence.

This rise-and-fall story of Cuban hip hop is the focus of Geoffrey Baker’s intricate and carefully researched analysis of the cultural politics of Cuban popular music during this period. His work synthesizes a wide range of evidence and sources: song lyrics, CD and cassette recordings, music videos, and personal interviews with rappers, producers, concert promoters, publicists and other cultural workers, as well as writings in ethnomusicology, cultural studies, political science and sociology, magazine and newspaper journalism, documentary movies, and his own fieldwork experiences in
Havana between 2003 and 2010. His central claim is that Cuban hip hop emerged within a subtle and dialectical force-field of local and global pressures and opportunities, and that the intense scrutiny and documentation that it attracted—mostly from foreign, left-leaning sources—quickly influenced the development and direction of the music itself within Cuba. Baker describes “a double process that occurred as outside interventions in the Havana scene invented a noncommercial ethos and, at the same time, undermined it… International interventions helped to construct the Havana scene in the late 1990s as a cohesive, black, noncommercial movement, but they also helped to deconstruct it, bringing in temptations of all kinds” (p. 349).

Baker’s title refers of course to Ry Cooder and Wim Wender’s well-known recording and film project, which also took place in Havana at this time and which was aimed at reviving the older styles of Cuban son and rumba for an international audience attuned to “world music.” While the musical styles and the cultural content of their project could hardly be further apart from the 1990s Cuban hip hop explosion, Baker’s point is that the two actually share a common structure of outside involvement in Havana musical life for the purpose of defining what is “authentic” Cuban music, while the local musical trends actually veer off in quite different, unforeseen and “inauthentic” directions. As international audiences basked in the dignity and nostalgia of the elderly Buena Vista soneros featured in the Ry Cooder-Wim Wender project, Havana youth back home, under the spell of Public Enemy and Fab 5 Freddy, were free styling to beats and rhythms that had little to do with Afro-Cuban traditions. And then just as the international gaze turned its attention to the gritty and highly discursive sounds of underground Havana rap, assuming that it had uncovered authentic revolutionary music with socialist street credibility, popular music tastes in Havana shifted toward the apolitical, upbeat, dancehall, party sounds of reggaeton. Baker’s study highlights the fact that Cuba, stemming from its almost unique geopolitical status as one of the last instances of what used to be called “actually existing socialism,” serves as a screen on which much of the rest of the world projects various ideological and cultural imaginings that have little connection with what is actually taking place within Cuban society.

Baker brings to this project a thorough appreciation for both the multiple layers of meaning and the complex processes involved in the