

“Save Tampa’s Cigar Factories”
(A St. Petersburg Times Editorial,
Published, Dec., 8, 2005)

“No buildings symbolize Tampa’s immigrant history like the grand, brick cigar factories that still grace the City. Cigar-makers who moved their plants from Havana to Key West and finally to Tampa, not only established the City’s defining architecture, but they created more than a century ago the ethnic neighborhoods that define Tampa’s character, even today. Tampa’s City Council should remember that history and [should] act today to protect the factories as landmarks.

Few opportunities remain to preserve this heritage. Only 25 of some 200 factories still stand. . .and the Council will decide whether 15 factories not currently covered should receive preservation status. . .The owners of several buildings say the designation would unfairly restrict their rights as property owners because it would require them to follow architectural guidelines and obtain City approval to change the look of their buildings. [Instead,] they propose an ‘opt-out’ clause that would make preservation voluntary.”

(I have always admired the great and Gothic architecture of the cigar factories located throughout the City of Tampa. Few other places in America are graced with such gifts to the eye and aesthetic spirit. In truth, I had penned several poems regarding Tampa’s architectural tradition. However, upon reading the editorial, “Save Tampa’s Cigar Factories,” the idea was born and the image was created to develop a minor epic poem, in which Tampa’s cigar factories become grand ladies, divas in brick, or as is translated in Spanish “Las Senoras del Los Ladrillos,” the Ladies of Brick.

That the “Ladies of Brick” might live again, and that our love for their timeless beauty might also live again, is my fervent dream and reason for writing the following poem.

James E. Tokley, Sr., Poet Laureate, City of Tampa)

Las Senoras de Los Ladrillos

(The Ladies of Brick)

by James E. Tokley, Sr.

Poet Laureate,

Tampa

THE INTRODUCTION

Who would deny that times have changed

New attitudes have rearranged

the way we think and what we see

as beauty and prosperity.

What once was vibrant is now still

Like ancient oaks, bereft of the will

to live that, not so long ago,

was an inward spark that made them grow!

And so it is that dark eyes dream

of another time and place, it seems

where laughter, like Flamenco notes

was a perfumed swirl of cigar smoke!

And Senoras tall in their scarlet gowns

Wore the crowns of boncheros, rich and brown!

I see them on my way to work

Their hems bespattered with time and dirt

Brown eyes grown glassy with despair

A house of brick, in disrepair!

My sweet Senora of the Dance

A long ago pristine romance

Triguena, silent on the street

Mi Negra with her prancing feet

High-heels of marble! Gowns of brick!

With shawls that glitter red and rich

Raven-eyed beauties, brick and stucco

Divas draped in the best maduro

Cease to posture deadly-still,

But suddenly regain the will

To breath, to laugh, to walk, to sing

To let once more, their souls take wing!

And I, a passerby no more,

am Accione, the Black Lector

Facundo Accione, Tribuno

Beloved by chavetas and boncheros

Dependientes, mojadores

gather 'round to hear my stories,

as again, I seek to save

the Beautiful Ones from an endless grave!

El Presidente, ring the bell

Reintroduce both Heaven and Hell
to the clear and piercing clapper-note
of a perfumed time of cigar-smoke
Then let Segovia pluck the strings
“Leyenda!” Let that song take wing
To pierce blue-sky, Flamenco-style
Let lips of clay begin to smile!

And I shall summon, once again
Great names from a forgotten wind
Invite them to a Tampa ball
And they shall answer, one and all!
But I shall need assistance here
My lone voice may not be enough,
‘Lest beauteous brick with ancient ears
repays my entreaties with rebuff!

So, Jose Dolores Poyo, come!
Juan Maria Reyes, none
but you could ever turn the head
of a brick senora or raise the dead

Ramon Rivero y Rivero,
Great Luisa Capteillo/ and
How could I in truth, forget/ the
Name of Victorio Manteiga!
Like a Greco chorus, sing
the songs that once inspired kings,
in hopes we might invoke, by chance,
the scarlet words that make Death dance
and by the names we shall now call,
lift up brick heels and let them fall!
Awaken, Ladies, you who've slept
while those of us who love you wept!
The finest trumpeter waits his chance
to play for you and watch you dance!

THE INVITATION

With the strength of a guajiro
And the song of the great Segundo
I, your sole Lector, Facundo
Will attempt to habla Cubanito!

West Tampa's what I summon, first/ with
Café con leche to slake my thirst
I call **S**antaella, she who stood
in brick, when others dressed in wood
When winds of fury licked the world,
She danced unharmed with finest pearls,
Who gave West Tampa her brown hand
to beget Flor Mia and the Optima brands
Mi Negra, Santaella, si!
Step out, once more, to dance with me!

And then I call on **V**illazon
Rene's beloved and gorgeous one
Lolita Lindo, there you stand
Stretch out your tawny Cuban hand
Tobacco brown, as in full-bloom
Intoxicating, thick perfume
of cigar smoke that soaks your gown
of sun-baked brick, Cubano-brown
Garcia Y Vega is the name
you wear with Villazon, the same. . .
Awaken, I request you do
For, tonight, we wish to dance with you
Until the breaking of new day,

Like a sweet Hoyo de Monterey!

And **M**organita (Little One)

Whose Juan De Fuca, favorite son

Begat Lozano, Don Sebastian,/ and

Independent, fueled with passion

in your brick Flamenco gown

We lost you once, but now you're found!

Come with us when you hear our call

Triguena Bella of the Tampa Ball!

San **M**artin **Y** **L**eon, I yell

Politely, but cannot dispel

The utter beauty of your hand

The "clear" Havanas of your brand

"El Briche," Flor de San Martin

Y'Leon, pungent as a dream

Though many of discerning taste

Put Hoyo de Cuba in first place

Ola, Mi Negra! Ven Aca!

Come dance for us, like a morning star!

Samuel **D**avis sparkling new
Flamenco gown of brown-brick hue
Dipped in the dye of cigar-smoke
And the sound of Segundo guitar notes,
Collect your stature once again
For the starving eyes of cigar'd men
Revive your seductive El Sideló,
And Harvester, so brown and mellow
Like a lasting kiss, so cinnamon-sweet
From the lips of one whose dancing feet
spell passion tapped from a conga-sound
Come rustle your skirts and hike them 'round!

Senora **B**albin, born to be
A daughter of the Brothers-Three
Asturias, robust Espana!
Elizardo, Mi Tampania!
Please awaken from your sleep
To prance these old familiar streets
West Tampa calls RSVP!
So, por favor, come dance with me!

Ola, **B**astilla, do you hear me?
Rouse yourself and hasten near me
Wear your best embroidered shawl
As red a-brick on a fact'ry wall
And I shall wear my guayabera
Whiter than an Alpine mesa
And once more, we two shall dance
The streets of Tampa, in a trance
Oh, Valentine, come claim your daughter
Or was Felipe him who brought her
to West Tampa, there to show
her legs, La Pila, El Siglo!
Imposing Princess, brick and mortar
Won't you live again, my daughter!
Ibrahim Ferrer is here
To sing "Camina a Ver!"

Then **Y'Penda Alvarez**

Tempestuous and Heady One,
I summon you to reawaken
For, the ball has just begun
A renaissance for mojadores
Dependientes blend once more
The leaves that once had made you famous
Household word, on distant shores!
Y'Pendas! You who loves to dance!
Please give poor Accione a chance
To kiss your lips and end your sleep
Los Reyes de Espana – sweet! –
Lolita with your russet dress
of brick and mortar, flounced and pressed
When the sun has turned gold-filigree
From silver windows, dance with me!

The hum and thrum of conga drums

The anthem and the vine are one

The seed that grows the roller's art

Like love, cannot be torn apart

Like life-eternal, it must be

The leaf that blossoms from the tree

The statue that shall never fall

The ear that hears when it is called

No matter what nor how the face

is twisted, time shall be erased!

And so, I summon **Andres Diaz**,

of Habana Avenue

Who wears the gown of brick and mortar

like her sisters used to do

Who came from a distant Cuban shore,

But who rolls the sacred leaf, no more

Nor cuts it so it can be kept

in a New York Banker's private debt.

With white shirt and tuxedo pants,

I ask them all once more, to dance!

But before they dance, there is one more stop

That must be made, at a sacred spot!

To Ybor City we must sweep
Away the web of a fitful sleep
To liberate the captives there
Who are dead to a fellowship they once shared

I call the name of **F. Lozano**
Draped in gracious brick-Cubano
Eloquent in frame and grace
Whose heritage is in her face
Fecundo and his trusty corps
Of the world-Espana's best Lectors
Invite you to a big soiree
To hear Compay Segundo play
To dance like you have never done
Since cigar smokers choked the sun
By accident and turned it red
Put your best peineta on your head!
And we shall stand and wait for you,
On fabled 7th Avenue!

Til then, I call **O**liva here

Oliva-mia, are you near?

You, with your ruby-sequined feet

Like Dorothy, on North 19th Street,

Though the one who named you is no more,

Come step with Accione, upon the great dance floor!

J. Seidenberg, please wear your best

Your best coquina-ballroom dress

With wisps of cigar-spice perfume,

We'll stand when you come in the room!

And the great Manteiga will recite

Your pedigree like a starry night

In Ybor City! And the Moon

will bow to a Chapin-Choven tune!

Arturo Fuente, with your gown

Resplendent, best that could be found

Garcia Bouquet, robust Sweethearts,

Elite, Fuente, cutter's art

whose name became the single note

most often sung by them who smoked

the finest Panatelas made. . .

Awaken, Fuente, unafraid

And join your sisters on the street

With their red zapatos on their feet!

I call tall-crested **R**eginbois

Y **R**egensberg **L**a **F**abrica

Whose slender neck and shoulders rich

In wondrous sculpted folds of brick

accentuate a face sublime

Well-coiffed and capped that still keeps time

Oh, sensual Senora, would

it bother you if I, but could

arouse your interest, in the chance

you might revive yourself to dance?

If so, I conjure, Corazon

With words for you and you, alone!

Yet, there are others I implore

Gonzalez **F**isher, mi Senora

Vestido'd in glistening brick

Whose hips stand graceful, wide and thick

Come join us, if you think you might

At the Union-Italian Ball, tonight!

Corral Wodiska, Jimmy's daughter

Bella Donna of the order

Senoritas dressed in brick

Whose thick skirts rustle, as they switch

and curtsey, graceful as the ships

that bore Columbus on their hips

Handmade were all your million-charms

by men and women whose brown arms

and eyes remembered every line

and wrinkle of tobacco vines

and how to cut and roll them lest

they fail to find the very best!

Mi Negra Y'Wodiska, por

Favor, please join me, on the floor!

And yet, there is one more I seek

Her memory looms tall and sleek

And beautiful within my mind

I approach and hope she will be kind!

I wait, yet, as I wait, I see
The Splendid One gaze back at me
Her onyx-eyes that reflect the sun
And turn jet-black, when day is done
Ornate vestido she has worn to please
countless suitors, on their knees
Who sought her delicate, perfumed hand
And extolled her charms to foreign lands
Who was, but now no more shall be
Upon this earth, a rarity
of cigar'd pleasure, hear my plea
To live again and dance with me!/ Cast
off false garments that constrict
your ample form of royal brick
Senora Ybor, she whose name
is a city robed in global fame. . .
is a brand that once claimed proud and shrill
to have gone with guns, up San Juan Hill
I know you by your sweet perfume
And conjure you by a Tampa Moon
V. M. Ybor, your father's name,
To dance with Facundo is no shame!

And I shall summon others, too
And beg their beauty be renewed,
One special night, there to receive,
Before the fall, one last reprieve
A gathering before good-bye
To live again and then to die!
Mi Maestro, raise your rhythm stick
For the Great Senoras draped in brick!

THE DANCE

A Temple to the God Romano
L'Unione Italiano
Brother of the Cuban Club
A Parthenon the Grecos loved
is the place where Las Senoras de
Los Ladrillos cast their spell
Upon an Ybor City night
Beneath a moon and bright star-light
Outside, Corinthian columns glisten
White as moonlight, as we listen
To a well-rehearsed conjunto
play a mesmerizing Mambo
while the ladies dressed in brick

lift up their skirts and begin to kick
and whirl upon a parquet'd floor
beside quick-stepping smart Lectors
who feel the rhythm's cha-cha-beat
and measure congas with their feet!

And the cigar-divas, like a knife
as sharp as noonday, come to life
Brown fingers wrapping 'round the arms
of Lectors, as the music swarms
like Cuban honey bees as sweet
as a rum-tipped smoke or a kiss-complete!

So, we dance until the night grows old
And daylight wakes up stiff and cold
We dance the way they did in Spain
As Garcia Lorca sings of pain
And Ibrahim Ferrer, despite
His years of silence, seizes the mike!

And the ancient **G**oddess **L**a **P**erfecta
Spreads her arms from Old Havana
To the shores of Tampa Bay
As the sun breaks forth another day
And I awake as if I'd been
In the womb of an horrific dream

Yet, what now echoes in my mind
is the whisper I had not been blinded
by a dream, but had been cast
in a vision, which awoke the Past
and bid it dance, as it once had done
when the World and Cigar-smoke was one!
And the Ladies of the Brick Brocade
Had nestled under palm-tree shade
of Tampa, there I held their hands
as I set to answer their demands. . .
To dance these Tampa streets, once more
In their Spanish gowns and shawls galore!
And that we did, which was no dream
For, once more, each one was a queen,
Who saintly sat upon her block
'til past the hour of 3 o'clock,
the witching-hour or so it's said,
when spirits spring back from the dead!

Facundo Accione was I
A Black Lector, from days gone by!
But a Lector, I shall always be,
In the lap of Tampa History,
Where beautiful divas, brown and thick
Wore proud vestidos red as brick
Who danced on guayabera notes
With their gowns as light as cigar-smoke!

And when I pass them, now, I say,
“Senoras, how are you, today?”
And in my mind I’d like to think,
They see Facundo, and they wink!

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LAS SENORAS DEL LOS LADRILLOS

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