

Rumba, Interrupted

The Bush administration breaks up the long-running dance between American and Cuban musicians.

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If you want to hear Cuban music played by Cuban musicians in the United States, head for Vegas. The only musicians from Cuba granted entry here during the past year perform at the Stardust Resort & Casino's Wayne Newton Theater through April. Their Havana Night Club: The Show arrived at the invitation of illusionists Siegfried and Roy. How fitting.

It wasn't magic that produced these artists, just tricky legal and political maneuvering among anti-Castro militants. And it should come as no surprise that all of the 51 original cast members sought political asylum shortly after arriving here.

Such intrigue is a smoke screen designed to obscure a troubling underlying reality: The Bush administration has severed the fertile connection between Cuban and American musicians—and audiences—by reversing American policy.

In 2004 alone, the list of Cuban musicians forced to cancel performances due to visa denials includes Buena Vista Social Club singers Ibrahim Ferrer and Omara Portuondo, jazz pianist Jesus "Chucho" Valdés, singer-songwriter Carlos Varela, the seminal dance band Los Van Van, and the folkloric ensemble Los Muñequitos de Matanzas.

The security crunch following 9/11 has given immigration authorities the excuse they've long sought to exclude many foreign musicians from the United States. But against Cubans, the resistance runs far deeper. This is a Cuban music crisis—a development that has more to do with the Cold War than the War on Terror.

"Havana Night's is an anomalous case," said Qbadisc label founder Ned Sublette, whose Cuba and Its Music is the most thorough and colorful argument for just how elemental Cuban music has been to American culture. "This embargo on Cuba," he told me, "is an embargo on us as well. It cuts us off from one of the most important musical cultures in the world, one that's vital to our own identity."

The Cuban embargo has been in effect since 1961. Barriers were lowered somewhat during the Carter administration, but the situation reversed as the Cold War played out. In 1985, President Reagan issued Proclamation 5377, under section 212F of the Immigration and Nationality Act, denying entry to "any class of aliens into the United States [that] would be detrimental to the interests of the United States," specifically those "considered to be officers or employees of the government of Cuba or the Communist Party of Cuba." This blocked virtually all Cubans, since 90 percent of the country's economy is state-run.

Relations with Cuba loosened throughout Clinton's second term—Los Van Van, Cubanismo, and many other Cuban bands made their U.S. debuts. In 1999 the U.S. began exempting broad categories of Cuban applicants from Proclamation 5377, especially artists, in an effort to encourage "people-to-people exchange." As State Department spokesman Lou Finton explains, "At that time, the American government undertook what it termed a two-track approach to its Cuba policy: tightening some aspects of the embargo but also exposing its citizens to American freedom and democracy."

With relaxed restrictions, Cuban music flowered anew in the United States. Ry Cooder's wildly successful Buena Vista Social Club would be impossible today; so too, Mambo Sinuendo, his Grammy-winning collaboration with Cuban guitarist Manuel Galbán. Cooder accepted his latest Grammy alone at the podium this year, as Galbán was among some 45 Cuban musicians, including all five nominees for Best Tropical Latin Album, denied entry for the ceremony.

Rejection letters from the U.S. Interests Section in Havana (the closest thing we have to an embassy there) cited a return to the Reagan proclamation "because the Castro administration has taken advantage of the exemption to enrich the government."

"This was an affirmative act," said Bill Martinez, a San Francisco-based attorney who has worked with Cooder and many Cuban musicians. "It was clearly meant to send a message. It was an out-and-out denial, stemming not from the Treasury Department but from other agencies and individuals in the executive branch. The Bush administration is using artists' visas as an offensive tool to implement foreign policy."

One protest came in a March New York Times op-ed piece by singer-songwriter Jackson Browne, in response to Varela's visa denial. "In a profound way," wrote Browne, who toured with Varela in Europe, "our government takes on the role of oppressor when it tries to control which artists will be allowed access to our minds and hearts."

Joe Garcia, former executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation, lobbied on behalf of the Havana Night Club troupe. "The group demonstrated that they were financially and politically independent of the Castro regime," he said from his office in Miami. "That is why we supported them, and why they ended up here. While I am a fan of Jackson Browne, he misses the point when he supports artists who don't denounce Castro."

Saxophonist and clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera, who left Cuba for the United States in 1980, sounded a similar tune when I spoke with him just before he accepted a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters Fellowship. "It is my dream to play with Chucho Valdés again, and with the other Cuban musicians," he said. "But when South Africa was embargoed by musicians, nobody complained. Why is Cuba different?"

The anti-Castro hard line leaves no room for negotiation. As Sublette put it, "The polarization of attitudes between Havana and Miami, between those who live under Castro and those who oppose Castro, makes it hard to even have a conversation. It's created a civil-war mentality."

Caught in the cross fire are countless musical connections. I should be reporting on December's Havana International Jazz Festival, a biannual event that typically draws a who's who of American jazz musicians. At past editions, I've heard Herbie Hancock jamming with Chucho Valdés. I've watched Arturo O'Farrill, music director of the Lincoln Center Afro-Latin Orchestra, make first contact with the homeland of his father, the late bandleader Chico O'Farrill.

Chico O'Farrill left Cuba shortly after Castro took power, never to return. "My father was betrayed by the Castro regime," Arturo told me. "And I am not a Castro supporter. But to play with a Cuban musician does not mean you are supporting the regime. Playing music should transcend politics. And right now I feel betrayed by the Bush administration and the stance it is taking toward Cuba."

Like most Americans this year, I skipped the festival. O'Farrill's manager advised him that, even if he got a visa, he would risk a hefty U.S. fine. "It was devastating to say no to the festival," said O'Farrill, who has dreams of bringing Lincoln Center musicians to Santiago, Cuba. "It seemed so positive and so possible even two years ago. It just seems like a faraway dream now. If you want to have a cultural exchange with Cuba, you're going to have to wait four years."

O'Farrill is right. There seems no chance that the Bush administration will alter its stance regarding cultural exchange with Cuba.

Saxophonist Steve Coleman is one of many American jazz players who have derived deep inspiration and seminal information from Cuban collaborations. The Bush policies frustrate him. "I remember an audiotape of John Coltrane talking to several people in a room, in the early 1960s," Coleman told me. "At one point they began talking about cigars. Coltrane mentioned that the best cigars were from Cuba. Then in a kind of regretful tone, he said something like, 'Well, that's all finished now,' in reference to the recently instituted embargo. This was the initial curtailing of experiments like those of Dizzy Gillespie in the '40s and '50s. Who knows what could have happened if the musicians of the '60s had had full access to this music?"

Or what's lost today.