

Crossing Borders with the Afro-Cuban All-Stars
Their music and influence cannot be stopped
By Larry Blumenfeld

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When Juan de Marcos González brings his 14-piece Afro-Cuban All-Stars to Town Hall on March 28, they'll include residents of eight countries, from Mexico to Sweden, Spain to the United States. But none from Cuba. No musician living there (and planning to return) has played here since December 2003, when pianist Chucho Valdés headlined the Village Vanguard. After that, the Bush administration effectively shut down all U.S.-Cuba cultural exchanges.

González has contributed mightily to that cut-short exchange. Best known as the architect of the Buena Vista Social Club, he assembled that band with musicians drawn from the first edition of his All-Stars. (Their debut CD, *A Toda Cuba Le Gusta*, released simultaneously with Buena Vista's, was the better recording.) But he soon went his own way, turning down offers for more retro-styled recordings, or what he called "la onda de los viejitos" ("the fad of the old-timers"). He's been cleverly crossing stylistic boundaries with his latest batch of All-Stars ever since, blending traditional and contemporary Cuban sounds. His 40-city tour is equally resourceful in terms of border crossings: The band's members, all with roots in Cuba, have passports in other nations, thus sidestepping the rules that exclude Cuban musicians.

"This band is bringing a message," he says. "Cuba is here, independent of any politician or policy. Our music and our influence cannot be stopped. And it's time for the policy to catch up with the reality."

Such change may be afoot. Tucked into the recently approved Omnibus Appropriations Bill, despite vociferous objection by such hard-liners as New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez, are provisions that liberalize travel for Americans to visit relatives in Cuba. However, the bill does so essentially by defunding the Treasury Department agencies that police such activity, which is different from legal sanction-besides, it expires in six months.

"But Mr. Obama is a smart guy," González adds. "He's going to open the doors wider, at least to cultural exchange."

To that end, the President's inbox holds the urging of more than a thousand noted artists, educators, and cultural leaders via signatures on a letter calling for, among other measures, the elimination of restrictions that prevent Americans from traveling to Cuba, and Cuban artists from performing in the United States. (See it at <http://www.cubaresearch.info/cubaletter2009.>)

"I shouldn't have to ask permission of my government to travel anywhere," says Louis Head, co-founder of the U.S.-Cuba Cultural Exchange, which orchestrated the letter campaign. "Historically, cultural expression in the U.S. and Cuba are joined at the hip, and it's time to respect that vital connection."

"The letter is very important," Grammy-winning pianist Arturo O'Farrill told Amy Goodman of Democracy Now! "For us to be denied access to this source of cultural sustenance is absolutely insane."

The "Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act" (H.R. 874 in the House and S. 428 in the Senate), a more effective and lasting option than the Omnibus add-on, is attracting a growing list of co-sponsors and, if passed, would permit all U.S. citizens unrestricted travel rights. That should allow, for instance, O'Farrill to realize his dream of bringing his Afro-Latin Orchestra to Cuba to perform the music composed by his father, Chico, in the home Chico left in 1958, for good.

Still, we need the door to swing open both ways, so that, as Alicia Alonso, director of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, wrote in a 2007 open letter to American artists, "a song, a book, a scientific study, or a choreographic work are not considered, in an irrational way, a crime." González envisions bringing a 30-piece band to the U.S., adding such musicians as pianist David Alfaro, who lives in Cuba. No one should stop him.

Juan de Marcos González and the Afro-Cuban All-Stars play Town Hall March 28

...and here are links to two recent *Billboard* pieces: the first on New Orleans trombonist and singer Glen David Andrews and the nonprofit Threadhead music label, the second on Blue Note Records turning 70.