

Cuban artists kept out of U.S.
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The Bush administration's efforts to take a tougher stance against the Cuban government has hit what some in South Florida's arts community are calling the wrong target: cultural exchanges between the United States and Cuba.

The latest example is a decision by the Department of Homeland Security to cancel a visa for Cuban troubadour and rock musician Carlos Varela, days before he was to launch a U.S. tour that included a concert Wednesday in Miami.

Varela, an internationally acclaimed composer, last visited Miami in 1998 for a songwriters' event and a private concert. But unlike that year, which fell during the middle of a Clinton administration that encouraged cultural exchange between the United States and Cuba, the climate is no longer so inviting.

Hoping to address a growing tide of fierce criticism from Cuban-American state legislators and other Cuban exiles -- a key constituency for the Republican Party in a presidential election year -- the administration has cracked down on travel to and from the island.

Since November, when tough rules went into effect, dozens of Cuban performers -- including those nominated for Grammy Awards -- have been denied visas on the grounds that the island's artists are representatives of Fidel Castro's government.

Although Varela, 38, has made a name for himself perfecting a genre that Cuban authorities once despised as an excess of North American culture -- and has a reputation as a rebel who does not see eye-to-eye with his government -- the State Department's approval of his visa was not good enough. Homeland Security exercised its veto, the singer's U.S. associates said.

Varela said U.S. officials did not give him a reason for the denial. "I think it's lamentable that Cuban musicians and artists are paying for misunderstandings between the two shores," Varela said. "It pains us to know that thousands of Cubans who live there, who constantly follow us and have already bought tickets for the March 10 concert in Miami, will be unable to hear us because of the whims of some dinosaurs with power."

A U.S. Interests Section official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said recently that all Cuban visa applicants, including artists, are subject to a 1985 presidential proclamation signed by President Reagan.

It bars Cuban government employees and Communist Party officials from entering the United States. During the Clinton administration, broad categories were exempted,

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however, including artists. "Most Cuban artists are compensated by the Cuban government and are therefore its employees," the official said. "Proceeds from the sale of materials associated with an artist's work financially enrich the Castro regime."

In Havana, Jorge Gonzalez Riera, director of international relations of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists, said about 85 Cuban musicians have been denied visas to travel to the United States since November.

A Cuban-American state legislator who had been critical of the administration's stance on Cuba could not have been more pleased.

"I wholeheartedly agree that any representative of the Cuban government, particularly if they're involved in the arts, should be barred from entrance into the United States because as far as the arts is considered a tool of the regime," said State Rep. David Rivera, R-Miami.

As a result, Rivera said, Varela lives a privileged life, one that is out of reach for ordinary Cubans.

The singer's U.S. supporters say that isn't so. Because Varela has been critical of the Cuban government, officials there have not allowed him the kinds of freedoms afforded other artists who don't rock the boat, said Maria Romeu, a New York publicist and friend.

"It hasn't ever mattered how successful his career has been internationally or how much money he might have in his pocket, he hasn't been allowed to improve his living conditions," Romeu said.

For Cuban-Americans who advocate a hard line against Castro, Varela's continued presence on the island justifies his being denied permission to come to the United States.

Ninoska Perez, a board member of the Cuban Liberty Council, said it was "very hard to separate politics from art" in Cuba when some artists and intellectuals signed petitions supporting the government soon after the imprisonment of 75 dissidents and executions of three ferry hijackers.

"I understand it's really very difficult for people inside the island," she said. "But dictatorships have ended because people have spoken up. The fact is they haven't spoken against it [the imprisonment of the dissidents]."

Varela, who is committed to living in Cuba, rejects any suggestion that he is a tool of the island's government.

"That's not true," he said. "It's as ridiculous as saying that all North American musicians are instruments of their government. At least I'm not an instrument of anyone, or of any

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government. I've never been one and am not now."

Angel Estrada, director of international relations for the Cuban Music Institute, said he had no doubt that the visa denial had to do with the "electoral carnival that is being assembled" -- a reference to President Bush's re-election campaign.

Some members of the South Florida arts community agree.

"It's totally happening because of politics," said Beth Boone, artistic director for the Rhythm Foundation. "I think it is influenced by election year hard-line politicians."