

Cubans may fight to jam at Grammys **by David Cázares**

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HAVANA – Cuban officials may ask the United States to grant visas to the island's two Grammy nominees so they can attend the Feb. 8 awards show in Los Angeles, a request that will likely be denied.

Mayito Rivera was nominated in the best salsa and merengue category for *Llego la hora* and Manuel "Guajiro" Mirabal was nominated in the traditional Latin tropical music category for *Buena Vista Social Club Presents Manuel "Guajiro" Mirabal*.

Most of the island's musicians are effectively barred from traveling to the United States. The Bush administration largely discontinued cultural exchanges in 2003 to prevent the Cuban government from earning money from its artists abroad.

But Jorge González, vice president of Cuba's Institute of Music, which formally made their request Tuesday, expressed hope that U.S. officials would allow the island's musicians to go, now that the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences has invited them.

"We want our artists to attend because that also would give them the right to participate," González said.

After tough criticism from some Cuban-Americans, an important constituency for the Republican Party, the Bush administration imposed tight restrictions on travel to and from Cuba in late 2003, including cultural travel. Since the new policy went into effect, the State Department has denied visas to dozens of Cuban performers.

That infuriates musicians here and many cultural groups in the United States who say the Clinton administration's acceptance of cultural exchange built bridges between people in the two nations.

"I'm personally very alarmed because it always seems to be the forerunner of more oppressive measures to stop the course of another country," said Pablo Menéndez, the American-born leader of the band *Mezcla*, who has lived in Cuba since 1966. "Bush says he's for freedom in Cuba, but he sure is limiting our freedom by prohibiting people from going to the United States and perform."

The rules also upset cultural organizations in the United States that invited Cuban artists in the past, particularly those that had to cancel shows last year.

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"In the guise of protecting Americans from the Cuban influence, the people who were really being hurt were largely us performing arts institutions," said Bill Bragin, director of Joe's Pub, a non-profit cabaret space that is part of a public theater in New York.

"A lot of people lost money because of lost advertising, holes in their dates, refunds."

U.S. officials say all Cuban visa applicants, including artists, are subject to a 1985 presidential proclamation signed by President Ronald Reagan that bars Cuban government employees and Communist Party officials from entering the United States.

"There's recognition of how totalitarian this society is and who's going to benefit from that," said Michael Parmly, chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana. "Yes, American people would benefit from contact with Cuban cultural groups, but those cultural groups [are] so much creatures of the state."

People in the music business scoff at such notions and criticize the administration's policies for undercutting personal contact between Americans and Cubans that could transmit democratic ideals.

"When people have cultural exchange, when people can discuss ideas, when people collaborate, it makes things better," said Rachel Faro, a music promoter in New York and Miami who has worked with some of Cuba's best musicians. "If you freeze everything, everything remains the same."

The only Cuban artists federal officials have recently allowed into the United States were members of the Havana Night Club show, which defected last year in Las Vegas, said Bill Martinez, a San Francisco lawyer who has long worked to obtain visas for Cuban musicians. The United States has granted visas to artists who no longer reside in Cuba, such as the hip-hop group Orishas, now living in France, and pianist Bebo Valdés, who lives in Switzerland. Orishas and Valdés are also Grammy nominees.

That troubles musicians on the island, who say artists in the two countries have much to learn from each other.

"I think it's sad because artists have nothing to do with the disaster of politics," said saxophonist César López, who leads the popular jazz group Habana Ensemble, which visited Miami and New York in 1998.

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