

No Cuban, No Problem

The Latin Grammys were 100% Cuba-free thanks to the man in the Oval Office By Brett Sokol

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Were the Latin Grammys fixed by President Bush? Based on State Department documents Kulchur has received, that would certainly appear to be the case. Call it an only-in-Miami moment, one in which 2004 presidential politics collided head-on with Cuban music. And Cuba's musicians, who subsequently found themselves watching the Grammys from across the Florida Straits, weren't the only losers.

Indeed that hoary old issue of cultural exchange with Cuba has heated up again. Supposedly this was a matter finally laid to rest: Miami's new mayor, Manny Diaz, is thankfully more concerned with ridding the city's streets of prostitutes and runaway chickens than delivering the crowd-pleasing but meaningless anti-Castro harangues that distinguished his predecessors. The foremost Cuban-exile organization, the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), seemed to concur that attempting to disrupt a Cuba-inclusive Latin Grammys was pointless. "The protesters would be competing with Thalia's ass," CANF executive director Joe Garcia quipped to the Agence France-Presse.

All together now: The Cubans would get to attend the Latin Grammys, the usual fringe groups -- from the left and right -- would get to demonstrate peacefully, and the rest of us would get to go on with our lives. It was a nice dream.

Instead Latin Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (LARAS) president Gabriel Abaroa has spent the last week trading bitter charges in the press with Cuban government officials. To hear Cuba's deputy culture minister Abel Acosta tell it, as reported in the state-run Granma newspaper, Abaroa "conspired" with the Cuban Communist Party's favorite bête noire, Latin Grammy producer "Emperor" Emilio Estefan.

Estefan and Abaroa's secret plan? To sabotage the U.S. visa process for the island's ten Latin Grammy-nominated acts, three of whom -- Los Van Van bandleader Juan Carlos Formell, Muñequitos de Matanzas director Diosdado Ramos, and classical conductor Zenaida Romeu -- actively sought to attend the televised awards show. (Another four Cubans also sought visas to accompany them.) Official letters of invitation from LARAS were supposedly never mailed to Cuba's nominees, dragging out the visa process and leaving Acosta to fume about "the Miami Mafia" and its "barbarous climate of intolerance."

An indignant Abaroa retorted to the Associated Press: "That's a lie. I'm sorry if the post service is a little bit slower in one country or another, but all of our procedures apply equally to everybody." Miami's own public officials were too busy congratulating

themselves on a party well-thrown to worry about these accusations. Having put their best face forward with a protest-free Latin Grammys, they were duly rewarded by a wave of glowing media reviews trumpeting the city's newfound spirit of tolerance.

Of course, the rigging of this civic "test" was glossed over. With Cuba's musicians conveniently failing to secure entry visas in time for last Wednesday's telecast, most local protesters -- and any accompanying disorder -- failed to materialize.

So who really kept the Cubans from attending? Was there a grand conspiracy? Or was it just an honest bureaucratic snafu, the unfortunate result of lengthened visa background checks in the wake of 9/11 and the all-too-real threat of radical Islamists attempting to slip into America?

Forget about invitation letters from LARAS. Last Tuesday State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the U.S. government had waived the need for such letters from Cuba's applicants since the Latin Grammys -- and its nominees -- were so well known. The true culprit here is much higher up.

The State Department's responses to the Cuban nominees' visa applications, copies of which were obtained by Kulchur, offer a veritable smoking gun. They clearly show that section 212(f) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, "which prohibits entry into the United States of any individual whose entry would be detrimental to the interests of the United States," was invoked by the one person with the legal authority to do so: President George W. Bush.

In other words, Formell and Ramos were considered by the president to be security risks. (Romeu was told by the U.S. Interests Section in Havana her application arrived too late to be processed for the Grammy show.) Try to discern the logic here: Last year Ramos toured the United States with his Muñequitos de Matanzas folkloric group, including a packed concert at Miami Beach's Jackie Gleason Theater. Formell toured the United States with Los Van Van as recently as this past June, merely the latest of his countless visits to this country over the past seven years. Now both men were *personas non grata*. "It's Kafka-esque," says Bill Martinez, the San Francisco-based immigration attorney who handled both these and last year's visa applications on behalf of the Cuban nominees.

For the past decade Martinez has shepherded hundreds of such requests for Cuban musicians. Only once, in 1993, have any come back rejected under section 212(f), a designation given to Cuban government employees or Communist Party members. He concedes that delays have become common since the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act was enacted in May 2002. Jazz pianist Chucho Valdés (who was also nominated for a Latin Grammy this year but did not apply for a U.S. visa) missed his Carnegie Hall solo debut in June when his papers were not approved in time, perhaps because of the fallout from his signing a public letter defending Castro's crackdown on the dissident movement. But Valdés did eventually receive his visa, better late than never, and fly into New York City.

So what changed for Los Van Van's Formell between his own June tour and last week? Is he now deemed a communist agent and banned from America, thus nixing a Los Van Van concert scheduled for Key West on October 10? If so, why exactly did the president wait until the eve of the Latin Grammys to reclassify Formell as "detrimental to the interests of the United States"? Says Martinez: "The timing is unusually suspicious."

Suspiciously political, he might have added. Florida's 400,000 Cuban-exile voters are widely viewed as crucial to re-electing President Bush. Yet last month saw an unprecedented revolt by much of the Cuban-exile community's leadership, spearheaded by CANF, that threatened political retribution come 2004 unless Bush followed through on his earlier promises to tighten the screws on Castro. Well-publicized overtures were quickly made to several Democratic presidential candidates, who were more than happy to seize the strategic opening: Joseph Lieberman was personally escorted for a cafecito photo-op through Little Havana's Versailles restaurant by CANF's Garcia and Mayor Diaz. John Kerry, a vocal critic of Republican policies toward the Americas since the Iran-contra days, reversed his call for opening trade with Cuba. Even that staunchly principled liberal Howard Dean got the message. He too suddenly flipped his stand on the Cuban embargo, correcting his earlier position that it should be lifted.

Several sops were thrown Miami's way by the end of August. Federal indictments of the Cuban military pilots who shot down the Brothers to the Rescue planes in 1996 were produced, after mysteriously languishing at the State Department for years. And it was announced that TV Martí, a pet project of el exilio, would switch to satellite transmission, and so presumably overcome Cuba's jamming. Bush administration spokespeople insisted there was no quid pro quo linking these moves and the ultimatum coming from Miami's Cuban Americans, a notion dismissed by CANF's Garcia as "an insult to our intelligence."

"You can smell the fear at the White House," Garcia tells Kulchur. "They realized where their [poll] numbers were, and they knew they had to do something to put out the fire." But, he adds pointedly, "we're going to keep pressing for those issues that were promised." One wonders just what else Garcia feels he was promised. Perhaps a pledge that Bush would bar Cuba's musicians from the Latin Grammys, avoiding another protest-filled PR black eye for Miami? "I never asked for it, the foundation never asked for it, but it's very possible," he says of Bush's visa vetoes.

An official at the State Department's Office of Cuba Affairs declined to explain to Kulchur what prompted the president to reclassify the Latin Grammy-nominated Cubans as 212(f). But it hardly takes an insider to connect the dots.