

Working for Better Cuba Ties by Aurelio Sanchez

**Albuquerque Journal
December 9, 2007**

Note: this article confuses two entities. The Cuba Research & Analysis Group (CRAG) played a major role in initiating US-Cuba Cultural Exchange. The latter is the national organizer of the effort described within. CRAG continues to support USCCE and is its fiscal agent. Additionally, Paco de Lucía cancelled much of his 2004 tour because he could not initially bring in his Cuban bass player. That same musician was eventually issued a visa after half the tour was lost and many presenters throughout the U.S. had experienced economic hardship. It is very rare for Cubans traveling on Cuban passports to receive a visa to enter the US in order to engage in activities related to their professional areas of work. On February 5, 2004, the State Department formally returned to a policy which makes Cuban musicians ineligible to visit the United States. For more information see "The Missing Cuban Musicians" by Ned Sublette, available at <http://www.cubaresearch.info/sites/cubaresearch.info/files/pdfs/missingmusicians.pdf>.

Music is love, David Crosby sang. Recognizing this, a group of musical artists, agents and policy-makers in early 2005 began forming a cultural exchange effort between the United States and Cuba.

The Cuba Research and Analysis Group for U.S.-- Cuba Cultural Exchange is calling on the Bush administration to normalize relations between the two countries.

Louis Head, executive director of the Albuquerque-based group, said that until early 2004, it had been possible for artists, such as the local jazz group Ritmo Caliente, to travel to Cuba.

New Mexicans traveled to Cuba to participate in the Havana Biennial, the International Jazz Festival, and other events.

Conversely, Cuban artists and groups were able to come to New Mexico to perform and to make cultural and scholarly presentations.

But in early 2004, the U.S. State Department under the Bush Administration tightened visa restrictions, Head said in a phone interview.

That resulted immediately in the cancellation of an ongoing tour by internationally renowned flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucia, who had been scheduled to play at Popejoy Hall, and Cuban singer Omara Portuondo, who had been scheduled to perform in April 2004 at a gala for the National Hispanic Cultural Center Foundation, Head said.

"What has since resulted with the enforcement of visa provisions is a blanket denial of visas to Cuba," Head said.

He said New Mexico is one of the most affected states because of the popularity of Cuban musicians and other performing artists here.

On Nov. 27 a group identifying itself as "U.S. artists and scholars in support of cultural relations with Cuba," addressed an open letter online to the Bush administration.

It called for open artistic and cultural relations between the United States and Cuba, and also called for concrete steps to be taken toward normalizing relations between the two countries.

Specifically, the open letter calls for the administration to:

* "Open a respectful dialogue with the government and people of Cuba in accord with established protocols supported by the community of nations."

* "End the travel ban that prevents U.S. citizens from visiting Cuba, and allow for Cuban artists and scholars to visit the United States, thus eliminating the censorship of art and ideas."

* "Initiate, by working with appropriate members of Congress, a process that can result in the development of normal bilateral relations between our countries."

The letter and its signatories can be found at www.cubaresearch.info/cubaletter.

The letter is in response to and cites an Oct. 26 open letter to "American intellectuals and artists" in support of cultural relations with Cuba.

The letter is from Alicia Alonso, prima ballerina, general director of Ballet Nacional de Cuba and Goodwill Ambassador to UNESCO.

It states in part, "Let us work together so that Cuban artists and writers can take their talent to the U.S. and that you are not prevented from coming to our island to share your knowledge and values, so that a song, a book, a scientific study or a choreographic work are not considered, in an irrational way, as a crime."

It also calls for artists "to defend dialogue and permanent exchange" between artists of both countries as a "right and a duty," that will contribute to peace and friendship among their peoples.

Head said his group hopes to show that there is broad support in the United States for normalization of relations with Cuba.

It also hopes to influence legislation in Congress regarding travel and other issues pertinent to U.S.-- Cuba relations, and it also hopes to have an impact on positions by U.S. presidential candidates.

"Especially in the cultural and intellectual realms, there is a lot to be gained from a national policy that results in normalization of relations between our two countries," Head said.