

Musica en La Habana

by Jose Beltran

Mayra heard the bell ring and opened the door to her small home in downtown Havana. Mayra was in her 50's and had the beautiful dark olive skin of most Cuban people who have a mix of Caucasian and Negro in their blood. She was expecting three guests at her bed and breakfast or "casa particular" as Fidel Castro's regime had named the tiny inns that were now being allowed to operate out of people's homes. These small concessions toward private enterprise, gave the "owner" the possibility of earning some much coveted hard currency. What Mayra didn't expect was two of her guests to be American. The small party waiting outside her door consisted of two girls from the United States of America and a young man from Mexico. She had had English speaking guests before, Aussies and Brits and people from many Latin American and European countries but never anybody from the USA. As she invited them in and gave them a strong cafe Cubano, the typical sweet espresso type coffee drink, while she wrote down her guests information she viewed the girls blue American passports with a cautious eye. A trade embargo between the United States and Cuba had been in effect since 1961 and was part of the harsh Economic reality of the Island. One of the many consequences of the embargo, most of which are deeply felt in Cuba but hardly noticed in the United States, is that US citizens can in theory travel freely to the island but trade restrictions make it an extremely complicated event in practice. Commercial flights from the US to Cuba are banned so travel has to be done by way of Canada or Mexico and even once a flight that bypasses the US is found, airline tickets to Cuba cannot be purchased with American credit cards.

Jordan and Jaala are two native Malibu girls who until very recently worked at the trendy "Planet Blue" store in the fashionable Malibu Country Mart. Finding two people that fit the stereotype of where they're from more perfectly would be hard. Most people think of girls from Southern California as being young, pretty, tanned,

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light haired and liberal. Well, the stereotype pretty much describes Jordan and Jaala perfectly. Having decided to expand their horizons and get to know a little of what's beyond the Santa Monica mountains, two months ago they moved to Playa del Carmen, the jewel of the Mayan Riviera, just 45 minutes away from Cancun, Mexico. La Habana is less than an hour's flight away from Cancun. Many of the few lucky Cubans who manage to flee from the communist regime eventually find their way to the Cancun-Playa del Carmen tourist corridor in search of the a better life. This is where Jaala and Jordan first heard of the unique attractions of Havana. They were told by friends who had visited the Island that the best way to describe it was as a place where "time has been standing still since the 1960's". They could not believe there was still a country where there were no McDonald's or where teenagers were not able to download music and play it on their iPod. Small privileges taken for granted in places like Malibu. It was these same friends that told them about the "Peace without Borders" public concert that was to happen in Havana on September 20th. Some of the biggest names in Latin Pop, including Juanes and Miguel Bose, were expected to perform in the "Plaza de la Revolucion" the same square form which Fidel Castro has addressed his people hundreds of time over the last 50 years. A historical event given the political climate in Cuba where mass events like concerts are exclusively state sponsored and foreign artists are rarely if ever granted permission to perform. "Great. So how do we go to Cuba?" asked the girls. And the person they asked was me. They quickly convinced me to use my Mexican credit card and reserve three seats flying form Cancun to la Habana. I also called Mayra, of whom I'd heard of from a friend who had just gotten back from Havana recently.

The accommodations at Mayra's were definitely not something the girl's would be writing their friends in Malibu about. Although clean and comfortably appointed, the decoration was perhaps best described by Jordan as looking like "that old people's home I visited in the Valley once". They had been told not to expect air conditioning or Television but nobody warned them about the toilet paper

shortage. They could live without TV and could deal with the heat but they immediately confronted me about the toilet paper issue and let me know that I had to make it clear to Mayra that that was the one thing that was unacceptable. Acting in my role of official translator, I expressed their position to Mayra and she said: "It's not just here, it's a National shortage but don't worry, I already talked with my neighbor Laura who has extra toilet paper supplies and she's agreed to trade it for use of an extra fan". The crisis was averted. We had toilet paper.

"Who is that?" asked Jordan

"That's my boy Enrique and my two little grandsons Pablito and Nestor" said Mayra

"They're very cute. Do they visit you often?" asked Jaala

"No, my boy is in Barcelona. I haven't seen him in eight years, and I've never met my grandsons but Enrique sends me pictures often" said Mayra fighting a tear in her eye

"He left Cuba?" I said in the most neutral tone I could muster, knowing that "leaving the island" can be a very sensitive subject for many Cubans.

Economic hardship and political repression forces many Cubans to seek asylum in other countries. The only link they leave is family.

"He was a very talented pianist. He studied the piano ever since he was a little boy and that allowed him to entry at the Academia Nacional de Musica here in Havana. He won the first prize for piano in the 2000 Cuban National Classical Music Awards. He got a letter from Barcelona after that offering him a full scholarship to study at their Conservatory"

Jaala and Jordan were close to tears as well. "How did the let him go?" they demanded to know

"It took almost a year of bureaucratic paperwork and a lot of perseverance on Enrique's part but they finally granted him a travel permit" said Mayra

"Once he got there he met a nice Spanish girl and got married" she continued "He finished his studies at the conservatory and after

he got married he found a job in construction there. Now he still finds time to play once in a while but the important thing is that he's safe and happy. I know my boys will have a much better life in Spain. I would much rather have that than have them here next to me. Although it does break my heart every time I get a picture of one of the blowing out candles on his birthday cake "

We left Mayra's house in a pensive mood.

"Why doesn't Fidel let them go? asked Jaala

Why don't we (America) help them? replied Jordan

What does the dumb embargo have to do with these poor people? fired Jaala

Does anybody in our government actually think that Cuba is still a communist threat to the United States for crissakes! They don't even have toilet paper! exploded Jordan

It was finally Sunday. The day of the big concert. Mayra had warned them to leave early and take water bottles with them. More than a million people were expected to show up at the Plaza de la Revolucion. The concert would start at two pm. The time of the afternoon when the sun shines in the Caribbean at its most intense. There would be no vendors. So anything to eat or drink would have to be carried in. Jaala, Jordan and I tried to hail a CoCo-taxi as the small motorcycle taxis were called but had no luck. Thousands of people were streaming along the Paseo Infanta, the main road leading into the Plaza, and we decided to follow the crowd. After a thirty minute walk the road bended at the top of a hill where we could finally see the massive plaza swarming with people. The giant image of Che Guevara on the side of the Ministry of Industry building faced the crowd. Che had helped give the Cuban people hope and change from General Batista's oppression in 1959. Perhaps he would agree that time for change was long due again in his adopted country. There had to be more than a million fans all wearing white. Miguel Bose strode on the stage "Como estamos Cuba?" thousands of Cuban flags and white handkerchiefs went up in the air. Five hours of internationally acclaimed artists singing

their music in one of the world's largest communist forums was a gift that the culturally starved people of Cuba could hardly believe. They were intoxicated with music. Love was in the air. "It's time for change... Es hora de cambiar... Turn hate into love... Cambia el odio por amor" Juanes, the Colombian superstar was breaking his agreement with the Cuban government not to politicize the concert. But the people loved it.

Jaala and Jordan left the Plaza singing "It's time for change..."

"There must be something we can do to help" said Jaala

"We can at least tell people in LA what we saw. Fidel might be a liar but thinking Cuba is the enemy is just as big of a lie" said Jordan

