

**CULTURAL COUNTERPOINTS:
Examining the Musical Interactions between the U.S. and Latin America**



**Storhoff, Tim (Florida State University):
“Awkward and Uneven Musical Flows: The Politics of Increased U.S.-Cuban
Musical Interaction”**

Abstract:

Since his inauguration, President Obama has relaxed the musical embargo of Cuba following a long period when musical exchanges between the U.S. and Cuba were few and far between. This has made high-profile Cuban performances possible for U.S. musicians like Kool and the Gang, Colombian-American rocker Juanes, the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis. This period has also seen more Cuban musicians performing in the U.S. because the State Department has resumed issuing cultural exchange visas to Cubans, and the Cuban government is allowing more musicians to travel abroad. While these exchanges can be seen as a part of President Obama’s call for a “new beginning” in the U.S.-Cuban relationship, he also cautioned against overestimating the political impact these exchanges could have.

In the same way that contemporary global economic processes create dense interconnections along with areas of exclusion and immobility, recent musical flows between the U.S. and Cuba are also awkward, uneven and discontinuous. While performers distance themselves from any overtly political stance, the disparities between who may participate in these transnational performances, when and where they take place, and the various controversies and reactions they inspire expose a range of attitudes and realities about the U.S.-Cuban relationship and its future. By analyzing the awkward and uneven nature of these performances in both the U.S. and Cuba, this paper explores the potential function of musical exchanges as bellwethers for future engagement between these two nations even when reforms in the U.S.-Cuban relationship appear to be stalling.

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**Awkward and Uneven Musical Flows:
The Politics of Increased U.S.-Cuban Musical Interaction**

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Cultural Counterpoints: Examining the Musical Interactions
Between the U.S. and Latin America

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Direct musical exchanges between Cuba and the United States have been few and far between since the Cuban Revolution and the institution of the U.S. embargo, but recent political changes in both countries have allowed musical exchanges to resume. Over the last two and a half years numerous American musicians, both professionals and amateurs, have taken advantage of these opportunities to perform in concerts and festivals in Cuba. This period has also seen more Cuban musicians performing in the U.S. because the State Department has resumed issuing cultural exchange visas to Cubans, and the Cuban government is allowing more musicians to travel abroad. But while musical exchanges have resumed, the flow of music and musicians between the U.S. and Cuba is still restrained and inconsistent. The tense political relationship between the two countries and their policies make musical connections awkward, uneven and discontinuous. Performers are forced to navigate complex bureaucracies and changing rules while distancing themselves from any overtly political stance. An analysis of the awkward, uneven nature of these performances and some of the controversies surrounding them, however, expose current realities about the U.S.-Cuban relationship and the potential function of musical exchanges as bellwethers for future engagement.

President Obama called for a “new beginning” for U.S.-Cuba relations, and his administration loosened travel restrictions for Cuban Americans within months of his inauguration (BBC 2009). These gestures led U.S. music promoters to apply for permission to bring a greater number of Cuban musicians stateside, and by the end of 2009, the U.S. State Department had issued 5,500 more visas for Cubans to visit the U.S. than were issued in 2008 (Murray 2009). At the same time, the Cuban government, now officially run by President Raul Castro, is letting more Cuban musicians travel and stay

abroad for extended tours. Many expatriate musicians who were previously barred from returning to Cuba have also been invited back to perform. Controversial artists and those critical of the Castro government, however, are still subject to extreme censorship and repressive policies (Erlich 2008). Despite these changes, the embargo remains in place, and President Obama has stated that further changes will be dependant upon the actions of the Cuban government in the areas of human rights and democratic reforms. The last two years have seen most Cuban dissidents released from prison and various economic reforms, but the continued imprisonment of American Alan Gross in Cuba and domestic U.S. politics will likely keep additional changes off the table until after 2012. Even if further reforms in the U.S.-Cuban relationship seem to be stalling, these musical exchanges are still significant and worthy of analysis.

Most U.S. musicians wishing to visit Cuba face a number of challenges in order to perform on the island without fear of legal reprisals, most of which are related to receiving permission from the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) within the Department of the Treasury. This office is in charge of supplying licenses that allow people to spend money in Cuba, making it possible to travel there. This January, President Obama announced a number of policy changes related to non-tourist, purposeful travel to Cuba, and the OFAC updated their guidelines and put the new rules into effect three months later. Now, if an individual travels as part of an official University activity or with a religious group, they can easily claim their travel is permitted under an OFAC General License and do not have to seek any additional authorization. Numerous universities have already set up programs in Cuba, many of which have a musical focus, and university ensembles have been able to perform in Cuba under these new rules. All other musicians and would-be-

travelers, however, must apply for a “specific license” from the OFAC, but decisions about who will receive these licenses have been made slowly and seemingly arbitrarily. Despite having received over 3,400 applications by the end of May, they have granted only a handful of licenses while denying others (McAuliff 2011). A group of Irish-American musicians intended to participate in Havana’s second annual Celtic Festival this April but were denied their license just a week before the festival was to begin. The OFAC claimed the trip would go “beyond the scope of what was authorized” while citing an earlier set of guidelines from 2004 (O’Connor 2011). On the other hand, the Office did issue a license to the Tampa-based Florida Orchestra this year, and they just completed their first trip at the beginning of October (Florida Orchestra 2011). These inconsistencies and delays have led to criticisms of the Obama administration for not following through on its rhetoric and legislation calling for more transparency in the OFAC’s decision-making process (Gable 2011).

Some higher-profile musicians have been able to avoid dealing with the OFAC altogether by getting permission directly from the State Department. On September 20, 2009, Miami-based Colombian-American rock star Juanes headlined his “Peace Without Borders” concert in Havana’s Plaza de la Revolución with the blessing of the State Department and the Cuban Ministry of Culture. This was the second of the 17-time Grammy winner’s “Peace Without Borders” concerts, the first of which was held in 2008 in a border area between Colombia and Venezuela. The announcement that Juanes intended to perform in Cuba initially unleashed a storm of controversy in Miami’s Cuban exile community, as some believed that such a performance would lend credibility to a

dictatorial government while ignoring the plight of political dissidents. Juanes responded to these claims in an interview with the Miami Herald, saying:

This is not about politics. Nobody called us, nobody invited us to Havana. I am not a communist. I am not aligned with the government. I'm not going to Cuba to play for the Cuban regime. Our only message is one of peace, of humanitarianism, of tolerance, a message of interacting with the people ... I cannot give answers to all these questions people are asking me. It's not my strength. It's not something I can control ... We are musicians, not politicians. (Levin 2009)

Amaury Pérez Vidal, a Cuban singer who also performed on the concert, said about the controversy, “Neither Juanes nor Cuba are politicizing the show, that will be for peace and understanding of peoples and to open corridors of communication that have been closed and tainted. It is important to emphasize that who has politicized this has been the minority and recalcitrant Cuban exile sector in Miami, which makes a lot of media noise, but which is less than it appears” (Monteagudo 2009). Despite the controversy, the concert went on as planned. Fourteen artists from six countries performed, and it was estimated that just over one million people attended the concert, making it the largest gathering for an international visitor in Cuba since the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1998. This was also the first Havana concert to be televised live in Miami, allowing Cuban nationals and exiles to watch the event simultaneously (Llana 2009).

After seeing the performance, many in Miami who had previously opposed the concert reported having a favorable opinion of it (Fletcher 2009). Although Juanes and the other musicians claimed apolitical intentions for the concert, political meaning was easily read into the words and lyrics of the performers. The most powerful moment came near the end of the show when all of the performers were gathered on stage, and Juanes shouted “Cuba libre!” and “Una sola familia Cubana!” These words avoided any direct political

criticism, and supporters of Cuba's government were able to claim that "Cuba libre" was a call to keep Cuba free from imperialism. However, these small political overtures were still enough to convince some in Miami that the concert was a positive, worthwhile event.

Two other groups have traveled to Cuba under the auspices of the State Department in the last two years: funk and disco band Kool and the Gang in December 2009 and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra in October 2010. Once again, the musicians stated their purely musical and nonpolitical intentions, and both groups worked in conjunction with the Cuban Institute of Music. Following Kool and the Gang's performance, the band was awarded the 2009 Honorary Cubadisco Award from the Cuban Culture Minister, and the band pledged to return to Cuba to perform in the future (Latina 2009). Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra already had a connection with the State Department through the "Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad" program, which they help facilitate. While in Havana, Marsalis and his fellow musicians participated in numerous concerts and workshops with Cuban pianist Chucho Valdes and then invited Valdes to perform with them in New York the following month (U.S. Interest Section Havana, 2010).

In visiting the U.S., Valdes joined the growing number of Cuban musicians that have performed in this country since 2009. In November of that year, Omara Portuondo, a Cuban singer who was introduced to international audiences through her work with the Buena Vista Social Club, was able to attend the Latin Grammys in Las Vegas where she won Best Contemporary Tropical Album. Five years earlier, she had to cancel a tour in the United States after the Bush Administration cracked down on visas for Cuban musicians (Murray 2009). Silvio Rodriguez, the singer-songwriter closely identified with the Castro

regime, performed in Carnegie Hall in 2010 during his first U.S. visit since the Carter administration (Gonzalez 2011). There are still many challenges for Cuban musicians wishing to participate in these international performances. Many have trouble obtaining visas in a timely manner, and only musicians in the Castro government's favor receive permission to travel abroad. This has largely prevented Cuban hip-hop artists from performing in the U.S. because they often address taboo topics and are critical of their government (Canal 2011).

Despite these challenges, Cuban rapper Telmary Díaz was able to participate in this year's large Cuban culture and art event in New York along with a wide variety of other Cuban acts. The city's successful ¡Sí Cuba! Festival lasted nearly four months from March until June and took place in multiple venues. Over 125 Cubans came to New York to participate, and some of the high-profile musical acts included Los Muñequitos de Matanzas, the Septeto Nacional, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, and the Creole Choir of Cuba. The idea for the event came about shortly after the State Department started issuing visas to Cuban artists in 2009 and a number of New York institutions began planning independent Cuban events. These venues and organizations then decided to collaborate in making a citywide celebration (Canal 2011; Gonzalez 2011).

A year earlier, Cuba's most famous dance band, Los Van Van, performed in Miami. When asked about political intentions, Juan Formell, the band's leader said, "We came here to do music, just music. We didn't come to the U.S. to do any kind of politics or ideology. If you ask me a political question, I'll answer you. I'm not mute, but this is not about sharing an idea or an ideology. You can think one way. I can think another. But we're talking about music" (Levin 2010). When the group last visited Miami in 1999, they

were greeted by massive protests and an aggressive, confrontational press. This time, however, things were different, and Formell credited Juanes' earlier "Peace Without Borders" concert for changing his mind about returning to Miami. During their performance in the city, the group was even joined by two recent exiles who had previously been major stars in Cuba, Issac Delgado and Manolin "El Medico de la Salsa." Such a performance would have been unimaginable even a few years ago, but despite its success subsequent U.S. performances by the band were canceled when band members did not receive visas in time (Johnson 2010).

These concerts, and the reactions to them, can be read as indications of a transformation in attitudes towards Cuba amongst the U.S. citizenry and members of the Miami exile community. After Juanes' Havana concert, the Co-Chairman of the Cuban Study Group, Carlos Saladrigas, said, "These results reflect what we have been saying for years, that Miami is changing. Juanes' bold initiative is an example of the impact and effectiveness of cultural exchanges. It is time to give openness, reconciliation and dialogue the chance they deserve" (Fletcher 2009). But despite transforming attitudes, musical exchanges still bring controversy. In December 2010, the Miami City Commission passed a resolution asking Congress to end cultural exchanges with Cuba, and other city commissions in South Florida followed suit. For these reasons Miami, and Florida more broadly, deserve special attention as awkward sites for U.S.-Cuban musical interaction.

This April, the Fuego Cuban Music Festival was scheduled to take place at the Homestead-Miami International Speedway. Organizers Mia Productions and Fuego Entertainment billed the event as "The Cuban Woodstock" and the "First Cuban Music Festival in the United States" (Torres 2011). Shortly after its lineup of Cuban acts was

announced, the city-owned venue filed a suit to stop the show citing the risk of controversy and protests. The lineup had prompted Miami-Dade Commissioner Lynda Bell to appear on Miami radio and announce she would do everything within her power to stop the concert, adding, “We understand free speech and will defend free speech, but not when public facilities and public funds are being utilized.” The cancellation resulted in an inquiry by the ACLU into potential First Amendment violations resulting from the local government shutting down a legal concert over political disagreements (Veiga 2011).

Florida politics also make it more difficult for university-affiliated musicians to perform in Cuba than their counterparts in other states. Although President Obama made it easy to visit Cuba for educational purposes with a general license, a 2006 law passed by the Florida legislature prohibits professors, students and researchers from using any money administered by a public university or college from traveling to any country on the State Department’s list of terrorist-sponsoring nations. This list currently includes only Iran, Sudan, Syria and Cuba. Because this law affects any money that touches a state university, be it federal, state or even private foundation grants, it effectively halts most travel by Florida’s student and faculty musicians. The law has already unsuccessfully been challenged in court, and that decision is currently being appealed (Adams 2008).

The awkward, uneven and discontinuous nature of musical interactions between the U.S. and Cuba arise primarily from local, national and international political tensions. The implications of these awkward interactions and the connections they create can best be understood in the context of other contemporary global economic processes. Over the last decade, anthropologists who study globalization have increasingly stressed that transnational economic and cultural forces are not universal and do not move throughout

the world equally. The word “flow” is often used to describe the movement of capital, people and ideas around the world, but flow elicits harmonious overtones and implies this movement is quasi-natural and smooth (Rockefeller 2011). Anna Tsing has used the term “friction” to discuss these heterogeneous, unequal encounters and how they can lead to new arrangements of culture and power (Tsing 2005). Despite initial appearances as disruptive, awkward relations are productive and vital parts of entering into a fruitful collaboration. Instead of being de-emphasized, these zones of awkward engagement should be analyzed and exposed to make their potential more apparent (Brichet 2011). Only after collisions and failures can routes for potentially smoother musical flows emerge.

The musical exchanges discussed here have been occurring at a time when some members of both major U.S. political parties have called for ending the travel ban and easing restrictions on agricultural trade. The political significance of these performances, however, is much more than just reflective of changing attitudes towards Cuba. President Obama addressed this topic when asked about the Juanes concert shortly before it was scheduled to take place by saying, "My understanding is that he's a terrific musician. He puts on a very good concert. I certainly don't think it hurts U.S.-Cuban relations, these kinds of cultural exchanges. I wouldn't overstate the degree that it helps" (AFP 2009). In terms of immediate, macro-level impacts, the President is correct; no single concert will unilaterally bring democratic reforms to Cuba, change repressive policies, free prisoners, or reset a half-century of antagonistic international relations. Instead, the significance of increased U.S.-Cuban musical interaction is less direct and obvious.

After the President signaled that rules governing Cuba travel would be changing, large numbers of individuals and music promoters very quickly began applying to bring

Cuban musicians to the U.S. and organizing events around Cuban music and culture. Individuals and institutions flooded the OFAC with requests for travel licenses, and the office's inability to keep up has prompted criticism. This illustrates that the desire for engagement by U.S. citizens existed before these policy changes and is still greater than what the government is currently allowing. The reception of U.S. performers in Cuba and the number of Cuban performers applying to perform here show that the aspirations go the other way as well. Political resistance still exists, however, as evidenced by the cancellation of the Fuego Cuban Music Festival in South Florida. Though as other examples demonstrated, resistance at large is decreasing.

While the U.S. and Cuba do not have a direct economic relationship or engage one another politically, connections are being established through cultural exchanges. These exchanges are awkward and sometimes controversial, but as more people listen and become participants, new possibilities for further engagement are emerging. While politicians and diplomats fail to pursue or achieve tangible results, it is through these shared musical experiences that action is taking place, connections are being created, and zones of awkward engagement are being navigated. As the flow of music and musicians becomes smoother, individuals become invested and other types of engagement become more likely. As Carlos Varela, a Cuban musician who recently visited the United States and even played for some legislators in Washington said, "Music is not going to move governments, but it might move people. And people can move governments" (Thompson 2009).

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