
Visa Troubles Aside, Jazz Flows Freely at a Cuban Festival

10/02/2018



“Being here is like heaven,” the composer and musician David Amram said after watching the singer [Daymé Arocena](#) light up the crowd at the Casa de la Cultura here on Friday. “Like getting a second chance at life, and most people don’t even get a first chance.”

Mr. Amram, who first visited Cuba in 1977, returned last week for the 33rd International Jazz Plaza Festival, a six-day event that drew Cuban jazz veterans like [Chucho Valdés](#) and the [Orquesta Aragón](#), as well as rising stars like Ms. Arocena and Yissy García. Despite tightened restrictions on travel to Cuba from the United States, the festival relied heavily on American performers, including Joe Lovano, whose first trip to Cuba was in 1986, and Randy Weston and Dee Dee Bridgewater, who were visiting for the first time.

However this year’s event took place under a cloud of renewed uncertainty for many Cuban musicians. Since the Trump administration’s [withdrawal of diplomats from Havana](#) in September, the United States Embassy here has stopped processing visa applications from Cubans, who have taken to traveling to a third country to apply for visas to the States.

But visiting musicians like Mr. Amram and Ms. Bridgewater spoke of their role as cultural ambassadors who could touch hearts in spite of political borders. “My being here is my way of saying, yes, Cuba, yes, you all amazing musicians, I stand with you,” Ms. Bridgewater said at a news conference, raising her fist in solidarity. “I am your sister in music and that is all I care about.”

[Ms. Bridgewater](#) opened her performance at the Teatro Nacional de Cuba with Mongo Santamaría’s “Afro Blue,” the title track from her 1974 debut album. She described her presence at the festival as “an extension of Dizzy Gillespie’s love.”

Yosvany Terry



Credit Lisette Poole for The New York Times

For the Cuban expatriate Yosvany Terry, the festival marked the first time in 18 years he was able to bring his own quintet from the States to the island. Now a lecturer at Harvard, Mr. Terry is a native of Camagüey, Cuba. The novelty of being on his home turf electrified the saxophonist’s set at the sprawling arts venue Fábrica de Arte Cubano, where he was joined onstage by his father, Don Pancho, who played the shekere, as well as his brother Yunior, who plays bass in the band.

Alain Pérez

Credit Lisette Poole for The New York Times

Alain Pérez, who performed with his own orchestra at the Casa de Cultura, is perhaps best known to audiences outside Cuba for his work on bass with the Spanish flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucía. Earlier in the evening at the Teatro Nacional, the multiinstrumentalist from Trinidad thrilled audiences when he took the stage with the Orquesta Aragón for “Sin Clave Y Bongó No Hay Son,” first as lead singer, then taking virtuosic solos on drums, piano and bass.

David Amram



Credit Lisette Poole for The New York Times

In 1977, Mr. Amram was part of the first group of American citizens to travel to Cuba since 1961. At 87, Mr. Amram is the last surviving bandleader from that trip, which also included Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Getz and Earl Hines (known as Fatha). At this year's festival, he carried a briefcase containing a number of flutes, burned CDs of his "Havana/New York" album from 1977, and a plastic bag of buttons bearing the faces of Gillespie and Chano Pozo.

Daymé Arocena



Credit Lisette Poole for The New York Times

Ms. Arocena performed barefoot and clad in all white in the tradition of Santería ceremonies. Earlier this month, she traveled with her band to Mexico to apply for visas to attend an upcoming Grammy event in New York. “It’s insane,” she said in an interview, venting her frustration about the process. “Immigration is a thing animals do — moving from one place to another to get what they need. Sometimes I think animals are more intelligent than humans.”
