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Cuba and Louisiana: similarities only go so far

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In the dead of this past winter, Michael Doucet of the two-time Grammy-winning Cajun band BeauSoleil found himself on an island just 94 statute miles from the southernmost of the Florida Keys.

That island is Cuba, the land of Fidel Castro and Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp. But it was things like the Buena Vista Social Club that brought Doucet to the island's shores.

"It was mostly for musical and cultural research. We heard all kinds of music. Even French music and that's what I was really interested in because that's where it is," said Doucet. "If you look at Cuba, all the way on the eastern side there's Santiago, that's where the Creoles came from Haiti after the revolution."

And from there, many Creoles found Florida and Louisiana and not only can you hear it, you can see it, too.

"Not only does the architecture remind you of a little bit of New Orleans and St. Augustine, but I've always been looking into the music," said Doucet, which included music from Haiti, Guadeloupe and Martinique.

"We've been playing folk Cuban music for years and to really get into it and to see how they do it, which is just how we do it," Doucet said, who took the trip sans BeauSoleil through Festival Tours International. "It's totally a folk music, the turn of the century music."

Doucet was staying at a colonial hotel with big shutters that overlooked a square. One morning, Doucet said he grabbed some breakfast and another cup of coffee — "the coffee's great, I always drink coffee" — and headed back to his room to chill.

"And I heard this incredible music. Man, I thought I had gone to heaven. I was listening to Dennis McGee orchestra hits," said Doucet. So he opened the shutters and there in the square "was an orchestra right under my window."

The orchestra had two violins, a viola, a clarinet, a trumpet, a trombone and the requisite percussion.

"They were playing turn of the century Cuban music called Danzon and it was so much like the music of turn of the century music of New Orleans," said Doucet. "You could see where the similarities are because there's such a connection."

Doucet said there's a Spanish cultural and music connection between Havana and New Orleans that has been around since colonial times.

"It was just amazing just to hear that," said Doucet, adding that he recorded and videoed the concert on his iPhone "and then lost my iPhone."

Although there may be rations and such on the island, Doucet said music is all over the place, from high school kids playing, to poets and trios "who've been playing together for, like, 40 years," he said.

"There was music every day, all day and all different kinds of musicians," he said. "I had a chance to play with a bunch of people and read music with them and perform with them. It was just wonderful."

Festival Tours International specializes in tours where music is the objective. Doucet went with a group of almost two dozen others who were "hip to music and ideas of culture," he said, noting his fellow tourists included Hollywood producers, doctors, musicians and regular folks.

"For everybody, it was just to go and experience this country of music," Doucet said. "Everybody was music lovers and experienced this country before it changes, because it has changed a lot, and I think it will continue to change."

One thing that hasn't changed too much since the mid- to late 1950s' revolution are the automobiles.

"There'd be a whole car, like an Oldsmobile '58 and then after that there'll be like some kind of funky wagon hauling about 20 people on it by a mule," said Doucet. "And then there'll be like a Russian car, which looks like a Fiat, that's falling apart and then there'll be Chinese bus. Then there'll be another old car."

"So that's how it goes," he said. "How they keep it running, I imagine they all have Russian parts by now. But there are some beautiful cars over there — from Cadillacs to Chevys — probably the latest ones are probably the '60s and things like that."

Doucet said the guide told them before the trip to bring anything they could to leave for the Cuban people.

"So I brought a lot of violin strings, guitar strings, music — people just don't have that," said Doucet. "Clothes. I brought a suitcase and basically left my suitcase. Everything just means something to them. They're very creative."

The fiddling front man also brought a bunch of baseballs, courtesy of St. Thomas More High School.

"And man, I was the biggest hit. I threw a lot of baseballs to kids, and we'd play catch and everything," he said. "They love baseball over there."

Doucet saw similarities between Cuba and his hometown in their attitude toward music.

"The music is so rich. In Louisiana, everybody plays music," he said. "Well, it's pretty much the same way there. And they just do it."

The comparisons, however, only go so far.

"If they want to learn music, education is just given to them no matter how high they go, it's free. Just like health care," said Doucet. "But then it's in kind of in that socialist form. They're free in a certain way. They're free to think and do whatever, but not so much they don't want to let them get on the Internet and stuff like that."

"They don't want them adjust to the outside world and be accustomed to that," he said. "But the outside world is

there.

"Culturally, that's a whole different subject, but very strange and different," Doucet continued. "It's like a Third World country. It's beautiful and the people are totally educated and totally nice because there's a big elephant in the room that keeps them down.

"People watch you. People can't leave," he said. "And that's how it is."

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