

Cuba, 1999

In March of 1999, the Indigo Girls were invited to participate in a song-writing workshop and cultural exchange program in Havana, Cuba, called Music Bridges. This program hopes to transcend political barriers through art. Although we were specifically instructed to approach this journey with an apolitical attitude, I could not help but see the trip as an opportunity to look deeper into the effects of U.S. policies in Cuba.

I found that it is not possible to be in Cuba as a U.S. citizen and not acknowledge the political implications of. These are some of my observations and are not intended to reflect or encompass all of Cuba or its political situation. Although I had a full experience, it was actually very limited by time and geography. I was only in Cuba for a week and did not travel outside of Havana. I encourage everyone to discover Cuba for themselves and to learn more about U.S. Cuba relations.

3-21-99

Met at Miami International. We were picked up at our arrival gate and shuttled to a special holding area to wait for our charter. Our bags were retrieved and put on the plane-I didn't have to lift a hand...hmmm. The escalator down to our gate was guarded by the police, I am not sure at this point who or what they were guarding. The first faces I saw were Gladys Knight and Bonnie Raitt. Me'shell Ndegeocello is here as well as Pete Buck and a seemingly endless list spanning musical genres, ages, and color. (Burt Bacharach arrived later. He seemed like a nice enough guy and, as we all know, he is the king of bird chattering pop, but when he wasn't floating around Havana on a yacht, he was going two hours over on studio time.) The host of the tour-Alan Roy Scott-gave a speech explaining that this is the first trip to Cuba of its kind and that we should behave ourselves and not be snotty American tourists demanding our way-we are to be good ambassadors. He failed to warn us against the "we are the world syndrome" and the trap of "American self importance." The two guys seated behind me on the bus to Havana failed the good ambassador test and made bigoted comments the whole way into town.



There are two currencies in Cuba-the Cuban peso and the U.S. dollar. I guess this is one way to get U.S. trade without actually trading. Evidently there were so many dollars coming though that they had to start recognizing them. The U.S. embargo is absolutely absurd. The resulting two currency system has created a war time black-market and an economic apartheid. Although the U.S. is not the only source of technology and products, we have levied our economic might against other countries and corporations who might trade with Cuba. My hero Jesse Helms created this famous set of oppressive rules in the Helms-Burton Act. We have all heard the stories of old American cars from the pre-revolution 50's and 60's in need of parts and the unavailability of certain American medicines, but the far reaching effects of the embargo seem impossible to illustrate with any degree of graphic accuracy. There is a profound lack of materialism in Cuba and it is hard to suss out what is the result of the embargo and what is the result of communism.

People outside of Cuba have a tendency to either demonize or romanticize Cuba (I am certainly guilty of the latter), but most Cubans I talked to simultaneously spoke of their love and hate of the system, leaving me in a constant state of confusion. Cuba is a country of extremes. The positive extreme is represented by super-high literacy rates, free and equal access to food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care, and a strong sense of community and culture; the negative is represented by repressive rules (especially in times of economic hardship such as these-Havana is literally crumbling down), a ruling elite class (what's new), and lack of capitalist competition creates a certain blandness in some areas such as the service industries. Cuba's poverty is not necessarily a result of communism. I will always romanticize the revolution-the "peasant rebellion"-and I got goose skin when I saw the monument to Jose Marti and the big metal sculpture of Che Gueverra's profile. While the heart of the revolution is beautiful and noble, I seek to humanize this place in my own mind.

The Hotel Nacional, where we are staying, is a beautiful art deco structure that was built by Americans before the revolution. In its heyday, it was bustling with celebrities and world leaders. It is still the fanciest in Havana but there's no way they could recapture the pre-revolution glamour, simply because Cuba is so poor. The Malecon, which runs beside the ocean in front of the motel plays host to late night strollers and lovers. The Florida keys are only 90 miles away, but it might as well be another world. To think that a country can be so close and so off limits...Who are we to say how they should run their country? What are we so afraid of? I wonder if we have to wait until the cold war generation passes to be rid of this paranoia. When I look outside my window, the old American cars give me a sense of being frozen in time; but then I remember that it isn't nostalgia that keeps things this way.

3-22-99

This morning we had the song-writing lottery. We put all the Cuban names in one hat and all the non-Cuban names in the other. At first the non-Cuban hat was called the American hat (which seemed perfectly typical for self-centered Americans). The director drew two names out of each hat to designate the first writing groups. Each group is to write and record at least one song over

the next two days. The oddest thing happened...Emily and I were chosen together. I didn't know if it was a set up or what but I gladly accepted it as a gift, the reality being that Emily and I don't ever actually write together. At first we were put with this guy named Equis (X)-a rap artist-but he traded off with someone so he could be with Me'shell. At first my feelings were bruised and I was disappointed because I liked the idea of working with a rapper, but I realized that he is a big fan of hers and felt okay about it. The two Cubans in our group ended up being Luis de la Cruz and Yosvany Terry. They are both very talented. All of the Cuban musicians who are participating are the cream of the crop of Cuba. I will say, though, that the Cuban side was sorely lacking in women. If it weren't for the diligence of Jeff Cohen, a songwriter from BMI who invited most of the women (among them Joan Osborne, Lisa Loeb, and us), the non-Cuban female contingent would be lacking as well. In the end there were more male than female lead players on both sides.

A good friend of mine, Giacomo, came over from Guatemala. We met down in Chiapas, Mexico, where he came to my rescue and acted as a translator. Giacomo was also in great demand at our writing sessions in Cuba. Luis doesn't speak English and my Spanish stinks! When Luis first came into my room, we were the only two there ; we just started playing because we couldn't speak to each other. Well, its sort of true about music being a universal language...of course this only goes so far with me and Cuban music...I could barely keep up. Emily's arrival helped a lot. She seems to understand the structure of this music pretty well. We ended up working on a blues/rock/Cuban style song. Luis is kind of "street" and a rocker. Yosvany, a virtuoso of many instruments, showed up late and we were well into the song, but his arrival helped us to settle on a structure. The idea is to each write our own verse and put it all together tomorrow.

Some say that the hotel is bugged and that there are cameras everywhere, so the Cubans seem very careful about what they say and do. Many of the musicians seemed uncomfortable with political questions. No system of government is good unless people are free to speak uncensored.

I ran today by the ocean towards old Havana. All the magnificent Spanish colonial buildings are falling down into dust and there is no money to fix them. Some of the more tourist-oriented sections of old Havana are being propped up, but the amount of rebuilding that needs to be done is beyond comprehension. The emissions from polluting cars along with the unchecked industrial smog really take getting used to. I felt sick to my stomach after every run-like a hot august day on the Los Angeles freeway. I would love to see the Cuban mountains and countryside.

When walking around Havana I get the sense of Fidel desperately trying to hold on to his vision, becoming more like a dictator and scared of losing control of his people who are holding on by the skin of their teeth. The Cuban spirit is unmatched. They have education and culture but also have their freedom constantly challenged. To remain true to a vision of community pride and involvement, this is a trick for anyone. Luis, my collaborating partner says that in truth, he wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

Tonight I am tired and disoriented but I am pledging to get out and see more tomorrow. I have got to learn to speak Spanish...the language barrier really wears me down.

3-23-99

I am not sleeping much at night.

I went running by the ocean again today on the smog infested Malecon. I saw lots of school kids (mostly boys) wearing skimpy bathing suits, playing a sort of game that involved diving off the wall as the waves washed in. Most of the kids I see here are very lean, but in an athletic way rather than a malnourished way. Of course, one does get the feeling after being here a few days that food is pretty scarce.

While I was running many guys would make cat-calls and say things in Spanish to me. My inability to understand the language made it hard to know how to react but my general feeling is that this is some universal rudeness on the part of the male species. It's hard to be a woman in a foreign country; sexual context is always the lowest common denominator. Giacomo says that it is "the Latin way"...we often discuss this issue of cross cultural oppression. The men over here say that the women love it... hmmm... that's what they say in the States, too. I have also been told that the lack of sexual boundaries is due to the heat. I understood some of this as we jammed earlier tonight in Luis's band rehearsal space. Emily and I with a bunch of sweaty shirtless guys packed into a small room, making music. I felt the allure and infectiousness of Cuban culture - the African rhythms and the Spanish melodies. I felt the erotic energy as the percussion section rose to a climax, everyone was dancing and all ideas of self seemed to escape us. We worked on a song of mine just for fun called "Compromise." It took on this Cuban-punk vibe that we all were digging. The other song that we are writing together is coming along , but Luis is the only one who has finished his lyrics.

The rehearsal space that we used today (which is very nice) is provided by the State for Luis's band-Bolsa Negra. It seems that musicians are supplied with some basic needs and extensive training but in return they play for next to nothing (Luis makes \$5 for a show). We met two guys who are with some sort of ministry that is in charge of producing shows for the State. They seemed to hang around the rehearsal space making sure that the bands have what they need. The musical/recording equipment used in Cuba is mostly substandard and very limited. Nice instruments are appreciated and coveted in a way that American rock stars can't understand. Luis did not own an acoustic guitar, Yosvany did not own a keyboard.

Musicians and artists are treated relatively well in Cuba. My theory is the "Fidel's coffee theory"-everyone in Cuba drinks coffee one way and it's probably the same way that Fidel drinks his. It's a metaphor for the material side of life in Cuba, which is mostly bland, minimal, and non-experimental. Cubans express their individualism through art, music, and sports. The culture here is so deep and so revered-your art reflects who you are and takes on more significance and respect in this environment as opposed to the commercialism that co-opts music in a more materialistic (read: capitalist) setting.

3-24-99

We had a new lottery today. It was sad to leave our dynamic duo - Luis and Yosvany Terry - behind, but we all felt that it would be in the spirit of things to throw our names back into the pool. Emily was paired with Ray Guerra and one of the Lowenstein twins. Ray is a true virtuoso on the guitar and has played with such Latin American greats as Silvio Rodriguez. I ended up with four collaborators-Fernando Bequer, Harold Payne (nice guy, speaks great Spanish), Gary Burr, and Alfonso (I didn't catch his last name). Gary and Harold are from a very different school of song-writing than I am. They also seem more familiar with the process of collaboration. Fernando struck me the most with his eccentric punkesque/avant-garde Cuban music. He was also likely to go into a vintage 50's Cuban/American nightclub vocal style-imitating the Las Vegas greats that, in turn, imitated his forebears. Fernando was not as animated during our session but at the end we abandoned our song to listen to him play.

I find writing with others to be hard. Lyrics often end up being clichéd. The subject matter of this team's particular song was a love affair between a Cuban and an American, and the ocean that separates the two (everyone wrote about the damn ocean...jeez ...even me...). The song was a little too "straight " for me which was partly my fault since I had to be late for the session. In the midst of the session, some sexist remarks were made ("I like to try the word bitch after every line to see if its a good line," said Gary) and our group would of been better off without them. But my introduction to Fernando Becquer made this session a worthwhile experience.

Before our rehearsal session, documentary film-maker Haskell Wexler and musicologist/documentor Greg Landau took me and Emily to a house of Santeria in Old Havana. They were hoping to show some of the culture outside of the walls of the Hotel Nacional. I can't say enough good things about these two radical documentarians. Greg was influenced by his father-Saul Landau, another film maker-and has spent most of his life helping to illuminate the obscure folk traditions and music from places of political upheaval and disenfranchisement. He speaks fluent Spanish and has spent a lot of time in Cuba. He also spoke a little about his experiences in Nicaragua working with a Sandinista band. His work is very important, he rescues songs and rhythms from obscurity, much the way that Alan Lomax did, but he also fights the good fight. Haskell is an older gentleman who came up through the activism of labor politics, opposing McCarthyism, civil rights, etc. He is reminiscent of Pete Seeger-handsome and distinguished, with a lot of charisma and style.

The house we went to is in the old slave quarters of Havana. Greg's wife had lived with the families we visited, so they were actually all friends with Greg. The homes are like a maze of connected tunnels and rooms-like a little secret neighborhood. You feel as if you are underground and in another world. There is a open air common area where people are doing everything from hair styling to laundry. I am assuming that most of the people in the maze of rooms are participants in the Santeria tradition. The "mother" of the house, Felicia, invited us in to visit. Felicia said that her mother had been a slave and had died with a brand on her leg. The tradition of Santeria came directly from Africa. The religion focuses on the worship of Yoruba deities these deities represent forces of nature. The Catholic saints became attached to specific deities of Santeria over time-a by-product of having to disguise their religion. Santeria people will tell you that Catholicism really has nothing to do with this faith-the saints/deities are not persons but rather forces. It seems over time as the religion has become "legal" to practice they have hung onto and become comfortable with some of the hybridization of Catholicism and Santeria. Felicia told a story: during the time of slavery, when the practice of Santeria was illegal, the people would gather five stones and each stone would be possessed by a deity. They would place the stones around a specific type of tree and dance. The master believed the dance was for him, but it was really for the deities. This is one way they would disguise their rituals-the self centered masters would never guess that the music, rhythms, and dancing were all tied in with their slave's faith.

This house is special for many reasons, one of them being the dance and percussion that is taught here. Two masters of drumming-Pancho Quinto and Octavio-live in this community. While they are not well known in the mainstream world, drummers come from miles around to learn the traditions from them. Felicia has five sons and a daughter. All her sons play the drum, I gathered her daughter was musical as well because you can't really practice this tradition with out the music. We were shown a special African (Yoruba) drum called a Bata . Only men are allowed to play it because of the spirit that is inside it. I asked Felicia if women also had some special privileges or responsibilities, but she wouldn't answer and kept evading my question. However her daughter, Santica, the resident feminist did wish to talk about it. She said that women were really the ones in charge... hmm... I've heard that one before... but its really the same old story - the delicate balance between oppression and cultural tradition.

3-25-99

We went back to the Santeria house the next day to hear the drummers. The whole neighborhood gathered in the common area to dance and to listen while Pancho Quinto's band played. They play music in a crazy combination of rumba, Mexican, American folk, Cuban, and African traditions. The singers, Lizardo and El Negro, had a touch of lounge "camp" in their act . They were dressed to the nines in leisurely clothes. All the songs were sung a cappella to the drums. Michael Franti, of the group Spearhead, did some rap over the drum beats. It was nice to see the merging of traditions-or reuniting might be a more accurate word for it. Lizardo and El Negro tried to teach us to sing "Cotton Fields Back Home" in their style, but we couldn't quite get it. I wanted to try some of our melodies and words over their beats, but they didn't offer. Either we failed the test or as women we were assumed into a backseat role. Michael has a strong connection with Cuba and he became sort of an ambassador from our group.

The band performed a song, written by Santica (Felicia's daughter), that the whole neighborhood seemed to know (The song was about the black-market that has gone on in their community the men trading in liquor, cigars, etc.) and the police coming to get them. Some of the lyrics were sung in slang to hide the meaning of the song. The neighborhood was described as a "smoky cave." Santica wrote a verse or two about the men as "hustlers" which I guess wasn't so flattering , so they censor them out when they sing it. Even though she wrote the song, Santica did not sing a verse, but only joined in on the choruses. There are so many occurrences and omissions that scream sexism but once again its not in my cultural context.

My girlfriend Jennifer and I hung around the artist market for awhile, where we were approached by a Cuban male prostitute/escort, called a jinetero. We were looking lost and he came over and made some suggestions for places to dine. He tried to hire himself out to us. As soon as I caught on that he intended to accompany us the rest of the night I thanked him for his help and informed him that we were on a private date. These Cubans for hire are very persistent and plentiful. Given the right situation, I imagine an escorted night could be fun. Before he left us to our own devices he did talk a bit about "his Cuba." He didn't like the system at all and said that he would like to get out

where he could have something more to work towards. He hated the idea of working all his life with nothing material to show for it. I told him that a lot of impoverished Americans feel this way too, and when they get old they can sometimes fall through the cracks of our system and have no institutions or family to take care of them. I guess the idea of Cuba is that the people all take care of each other in one way or another and old people are respected. Still there doesn't appear to be much outside incentive to compete or rise above in your career unless its an artistic profession. There is obvious natural competition in both sports and the arts, but professions such as teaching or medicine are invested with an aversion towards competition (which is not such a bad thing). I like living in the U.S., but I could stand a more socialist and caring government.

After eating some really bad food at a top notch "tourist" restaurant, my beautiful girlfriend Jennifer and I headed home on the exhaust-ridden Malecon. We came upon two men setting out on Styrofoam rafts for an unknown destination. Our imaginations went wild as these two men lowered their raft over the wall into the water. They climbed in after their boats with fins on and bags in hand. As they paddled away, they waved an apparent good-bye to their friends sitting on the wall. The little lights of their cigarettes glowing in the night, floated slowly away. Of course, we thought they were headed to Florida, but they were only going fishing. For one thing this would be the wrong part of the coast to leave from and also the success rate of rafting to Florida is pretty low these days.

3-27-99

I had a full day today. Emily, Jennifer, and I went down to Old Havana again. In the old cathedral area we went to the Museum of Colonialism. Like the Museum of the Revolucion, parts of the Colonialism museum are also open air. It is in an old palace type building, set up like a Spanish colonial house. The constant exposure to the elements from the open courtyard areas takes its toll on the contents of the museum (the artifacts of the oppressor - but we coveted them in all their splendor). I actually enjoyed the Museum of the Revolucion, which housed the whole history and timeline of Fidel's revolution, much more than this one. The Museum of the Revolucion was housed in the old palace which was reclaimed for the people after the revolution. There were still bullet holes in the stairwell from the taking of the palace. The relationship between Cuba and the U.S. was well documented from the Cuban perspective - something we never get to see. Our government has been hell bent on defeating Fidel and his communism for a long time and there are many atrocities and covert activities to show for it on display at the museum.

Next on the agenda was sound check and rehearsal. No one seemed to know the schedule so we just headed to the Karl Marx Theater. The venue seats about three thousand and is nice but very modest and with an eastern block vibe. Most of the government buildings have this certain look. The fancy buildings are mostly diplomats homes and newly renovated Spanish colonial structures.

As the week progressed things are beginning to, as Emily said, "shift." Artists are starting to lose sight of why we are here and are vying for good placement in the show and many soap operas and weird dynamics reared their heads. The program unfolds itself at sound check. They have to cut some songs to get the show down to a realistic length. At first the song we wrote with Luis (St. Elixir) was cut, but only because we lacked assertiveness at that point. I decided that, due to the fact that we were trying to get Luis's rock band (Bolsa Negra) in to play the show, we should insist on playing our song. Giacomo and Yosvany were instrumental in making this happen. Our song was in.

Meanwhile, a question was posed as to whether the tickets were ending up in the hands of the elite (and tourists) instead of the people. Bonnie rallied a lot of us to take a stand for the people and insist that the promise of free admission on a first come first serve bases. As a point of graciousness, the show was to showcase as many Cuban musicians as possible as well as to present the result of the creative collaborations. Some people who knew the ropes took advantage of this and teamed up with more Cubans just to increase their visibility in the program. Ego seems to creep into everything.

We ran the song and it went without a hitch. We decided to add Barrett Martin on a second drum set. The Cuban musicians learn parts so fast. For example, Yovany brought an extra keyboard player and taught him the song so that he could be free to play saxophone. His friend learned the song almost instantly. If the embargo is ever lifted, American musicians will be given a run for their money. I guess the cultural embargo is lifted. But although you can record Cuban musicians, they are not allowed to make money on the records, nor from licensing and distribution. They get paid in per diems and a place to stay. Usually you can get around this by setting up a special account for the artist in the States. Touring is especially hard. The U.S. State Dept. makes it harder by waiting till the last minute for the special visa to go through. The American promoter takes a big risk in booking the tour and putting up the money, they could lose everything if the visa doesn't come through. On the other hand, some promoters get away with making thousands and paying the Cubans next to nothing with the rationalization that its within the law.

After the rehearsal, Giacomo and Emily went to party given by a gay couple. Being gay is hard here, but there is a community in Havana. A law was just passed that you can be gay, but not in public...hmmm...

We went to Luis and Elizabeth's (his wife) mother's apartment for dinner. Elizabeth is a community doctor. She wishes she could specialize in sexual dysfunction, but she is restricted to practicing general medicine. Despite the restrictions imposed by communism and Latin machismo, Elizabeth struck me as very in tune and confident. Although there is so much machismo here, but in terms of jobs there is a certain communist equity between the sexes. Sexism manifests itself in complicated ways within the dynamics of relationships. For instance, Luis feels free to strut around in the face of fidelity, and often sees women as sexual prey. At the same time, if this is possible, Luis respects Elizabeth as a peer and for the fact that she is a doctor.



Greg Landau and Spearhead's Michael Franti

We walked from the hotel through neighborhoods into a Cuban night. We saw once-grand homes that had been owned by the very wealthy which were turned over to the people after the revolution, and are now often shared by multiple families. The dilapidated state of the houses is an apt metaphor for the revolution - through the revolution they seized autonomy, but fell out of favor with capitalist countries and don't have any access to materials that would maintain their infrastructure. When we passed one housing area, a bunch of men yelled out to us laughing, "We have everything!" The Cuban sarcasm and defiance is intriguing and fun. On the Malecon, there was recently a billboard facing the curious embassy-like office that gives the U.S. a presence in Cuba which said "Imperialistas! We are not afraid of you!"

We saw a business with the sole purpose of cutting washer/dryer combinations in half. The appliances came from Russia, but only the washer half works so people have the dryers cut off. We also saw a place that fixes cigarette lighters. The Cuban's fix everything; nothing is thrown away.

Elizabeth's sister lives in an ominous Ayn Randian building. The lights in the hallways were all out, because tenants take the light bulbs for their own homes. The elevator only stops every three floors, so we made our way through the darkness with only the dim flickering lights from old television sets to light our way. When we got into the apartment, Elizabeth discovered that the gas had run out, so we had nothing to cook with. It was a bummer seeing as how she had bought the food already. Cubans live in a constant wartime ration situation. Still, while Eliza describes the "transitional times" (a term sometimes used since the fall of Cuba's main economic ally, Russia) as negative in many ways, she then will point to the kids laughing and playing unattended in the parks with no fear of crime. Kids are cared for well here because there is an excellent healthcare and education system. Cradle to grave policies in Cuba insure that the very young and the very old are not neglected. Cubans are instilled with a sense of community. After the hurricane in Honduras so many doctors left Cuba to volunteer their services that Castro passed a temporary resolution forbidding doctors to leave the country. It's actually easier for homemakers to travel abroad because they aren't formally connected to a job ministry and its obligations.



The Indigo Girls return to the US

We didn't think twice about the lack of food as we congregated with our new friends. The discussion went all over the place from serious to hilarious about music, politics, and society. The young musicians here are struggling for freedom and acceptance of their own expression-might it be rap, reggae, or rock. I pointed out that we struggle in the states to not lose our folklore traditions, and that through gaining freedom of expression, we sometimes lost sight of our traditional roots in the midst of our rebellion. Liven, the producer of Bolsa Negra, literally willed himself to speak English, his eyes welling with tears as he described the purity in his heart, his love of music, and his ambitions. The effects of the U.S. embargo spill over onto everything and dampens a thriving arts community. Someone said its like the Cubans are given the bat, the ball, and the glove, but nowhere to play.

We went to Luis and Elizabeth's (his wife) mother's apartment for dinner. Elizabeth is a community doctor. She wishes she could specialize in sexual dysfunction, but she is restricted to practicing general medicine. Despite the restrictions imposed by communism and Latin machismo, Elizabeth struck me as very in tune and confident. Although there is so much machismo here, but in terms of jobs there is a certain communist equity between the sexes. Sexism manifests itself in complicated ways within the dynamics of relationships. For instance, Luis feels free to strut around in the face of fidelity, and often sees women as sexual prey. At the same time, if this is possible, Luis respects Elizabeth as a peer and for the fact that she is a doctor. After "dinner" we took a Cuban taxi to see Yosvany's band play. There are two taxi systems in Cuba-the peso and the dollar cab. Most of the peso cabs are rickety old American cars (1950's) and are much cheaper. Americans aren't allowed to ride in the peso taxis, the drivers get heavy fines for carrying them. We piled in to the 57 Chevy anyway and tried to keep our mouths shut-three Cubans, three Americans, and one Guatemalan. Riding around in Cuba feels like a time warp, with the old American and Russian motorcycles and cars, even the signs and souvenirs look like they are from a time gone by.

Yosvany's gig was at a remodeled sports club (or "remodelated" as Yosvany would say) - its heyday was in the 1930's. Now it is a joint venture between the Cuban government and a Spanish corporation. It only serves the very wealthy-diplomats and foreigners-although I don't know how you get rich in Cuba. The contrast was absurd, going from the streets of Cuba to a palatial, exclusive club that was otherwise off-limits to our friends. The gig was a family experience, with kids running around and Yosvany's dad, a legendary Cuban folk/country star, playing percussion, singing, and dancing. They played a mixture of Cuban jazz, African, and traditional tunes.

my friends and I shared
the folkloric homegrown
in grimy best dressed postures

the elevator counting
in bars of three
cha cha cha
we needed help finding the one

3-28-99

Signs At The Ballgame-

XXXIII SIERA NACIONAL DE BEISBOL
DEPORTE PARTICIPATIVO DEPORTE DE PUEBLO
HOMBRES DE ESPIRITU Y CUERPO FUERTE
DEPORTE SOCIALISTA CUBANO

CUBA VS. BALTIMORE 1999

our wallets bulge
we have dollars to spend
encouraging apartheid
the exchange only one better than
starving them out

we know they are better
they let us win sometimes

we talk in romantic terms
time seems to stop
the fairy dust of pre-revolution splendor
we might feel better for the moment
as we infantilize
but finally our lungs burst with toxic smog
our stomachs reject the sameness
our grasp of the language falters
our attention to detail
catches us off guard
when the dog with bleeding testicles
walks by again

we are bound to lose our appetites
for this art
and pledge allegiance
to the cleanliness of home

3-29-99

Peace and quiet at last... I never thought I could embrace an airport yuppie fast food joint. Cuba is in my head now. I am OK to go, but the images will never leave. At the Jose Marti airport this morning, we stood in one line after another paying airport taxes,

going through the departure routine, jammed into a very small space with hundreds of people. I watched large extended families breaking down in tears as their loved ones left. I overheard some stupid Americans complaining about the incompetence of communism-but they missed the point. The lines blurred and moved slowly as families crowded around saying good-bye. This wasn't a time for expediency.

Last night I met Fidel Castro. After the show, we were bussed over to the presidential palace. The bus was crowded and some were complaining of having to stand and it taking so long. We are so spoiled. We were led into the palace and our bags were left at the counter. The security was very unintimidating. The artist were set aside to meet him first-which seemed fitting somehow for this country. We approached Castro one at a time and got to spend a minute of one-on-one time with him. I was visibly shaking and my eyes teared up as I introduced myself. I know that this man has participated in his share of violence in the name of the revolution, but his ideals (a "man of the people") seemed to overshadow the reality of war-this I have to ponder. I feel the same way about Che-a man who was dedicated to fighting the brutalities of imperialism but who also got lost in his own machismo and violence. The Zapatistas seem to be the purest movement that I have been exposed to. I think of Ingrid Washinawatok who recently was kidnapped and killed in Colombia, South America, and one reason to meet Fidel is in her memory. But how disillusioning that a women who fought for the people and sympathized with the Marxist vision would herself be killed by leftist guerrillas. This is the mix up of war. Giacomo decided not to meet Fidel because he had been touched too closely by his wars. Fidel funded the left-wing guerrilla movement in Guatemala and the U.S. government funded the corrupt right-wing Guatemalan government army. So many people were caught up in the middle. I told Fidel that I appreciated what he stands for and that I would go home with a bigger heart, then I kissed his hand...hmmm...I don't know what got into me, and I don't even remember his response. He had a peaceful demeanor and struck me as an old spirit who had been through a lot and sometimes may have lost his way. He was very otherworldly yet human.

The reception afterwards was lavish by Cuban standards but not the gluttony we are used to. The palace is very mod and communist in its decor with large dark rock formations inside and big white globe lights hanging from the ceiling. Emily and I left early and played guitar on the steps of the palace-this would never happen in D.C.

The concert was a mixed experience, like everything else. There was some posturing but I tried to ignore it and take in the last hours with my new Cuban friends. Since we could hardly speak to each other, we just kept saying "hola" and "como esta" and hugging - I love my new friends. I met a Cuban teenager in the lobby who was a big fan. He had heard only one song of ours-"Fugitive" - off of some Argentinean CD sampler. I was flattered and excited that he had heard of us. I promised to send some music over to him via Guatemala. One thing I noticed about the show reflected back to our late night discussions with Luis and company was that the audience didn't know what to make of the harder-edged rock and rap, but loved the softer pop, blues, and traditional Cuban music. The younger kids do have to go against the tide to express themselves. The older generation may fear Americanization of their music, but much of the Cuban jazz is also hybrid from pre-revolution days. Another highlight of the show was when Me'shell introduced me to Assata Shakur - an ex-political prisoner of the U.S. living in exile in Cuba. It was a massive honor to meet such a dedicated and self-sacrificing civil rights activist.

we swear that we will remember
promising God everything
but we go through customs
and open our big fat impatient mouths.

A.R.

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