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Narrowing the 90 Miles

How U.S.-Cuba relations may play out for musicians

By Larry Blumenfeld

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Cuban-born percussionist Candido Camero in 2010.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

In late December, 10 days after Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro announced a path toward normalized relations between the U.S. and Cuba, the dressing-room conversation at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, Jazz at Lincoln Center's nightclub, mirrored many on the subject: hope mixed with wait-and-see skepticism.

Drummer Dafnis Prieto, one of four Cuban-born musicians now living in the U.S. in an all-star group billed as "Nuevo Jazz Latino All-Stars," said, "A truer relationship between the two countries is what many people, especially artists like us, have been longing for. But as artists, we've never had power in these decisions."

Saxophonist Yosvany Terry, once Mr. Prieto's conservatory classmate and bandmate in Havana, said, "The ideas are exciting, but we don't yet know how this will be implemented. The devil is in the details."

Those details are only beginning to take shape. The first steps of an earnest if tentative dance began on Jan. 21, when the U.S. and Cuba opened their highest-level diplomatic talks in nearly 40 years, in Havana. Thus began a process, as President Obama described in his Dec. 17 address, "to move beyond a rigid policy that is rooted in events that took place before most of us were born."

Renewed political ties hold special promise for the relations between jazz musicians from the U.S. and their Cuban counterparts, which are rooted in even earlier events. In the audience at Dizzy's that December night was percussionist Candido Camero, a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master. He first arrived in New York from Cuba in 1946, just as trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (after whom the Jazz at Lincoln Center club is named), along with Cuban musicians such as trumpeter Mario Bauzá, percussionist Chano Pozo and singer-bandleader Frank "Machito" Grillo began blending Cuban and American music in novel ways. These musicians created a new, popular and profoundly influential musical style but also furthered a bond that pianist Jelly Roll Morton recognized as essential to jazz's origins—one never broken, yet hindered by a half-century of often-forbidding impediments.

Since the U.S. embargo of Cuba began, the ability of Cuban and U.S. musicians to travel back and forth has shifted with political winds. The late 1970s saw a brief but notable loosening of tensions. By 1985, a hard line restricted cultural exchange. In the late 1990s, even as the Helms-Burton Act tightened many sanctions against the Cuban government, some doors opened, particularly for artists, through an official U.S. effort to encourage “people-to-people exchange.” Trumpeter Roy Hargrove’s Grammy award-winning 1997 album, “Habana,” featuring stellar Cuban musicians such as pianist Chucho Valdés, was one reflection of vibrant cross-cultural collaborations at the Havana International Jazz Festival, then under the musical direction of Mr. Valdés.

The unexpected commercial success of the 1997 album, “Buena Vista Social Club”—produced by American guitarist Ry Cooder, recorded at Havana’s Egrem studio, and showcasing a collective of musicians then mostly unknown to U.S. listeners—generated a fresh U.S. wave of popular fascination with Cuban music. Still, the 1998 Carnegie Hall concert captured in Wim Wender’s Oscar-nominated documentary about that recording would have been impossible to produce by 2004, owing to harsh U.S. travel restrictions regarding Cuba. Singer Ibrahim Ferrer, a Buena Vista member, could not accept his 2004 Grammy award for a subsequent album onstage; he was denied a visa to attend the ceremony. In fact, following a memorable December 2003 engagement by Mr. Valdés at Manhattan’s Village Vanguard, no other musician living in Cuba played in the U.S. until 2009, when the Obama administration began loosening travel restrictions.

The present shift in policy is more formal and holds more lasting promise. Already, rule changes should bring more American musicians and listeners in direct contact with Cuba. As of Jan. 16, U.S. citizens can travel to Cuba for one of a dozen approved purposes (including public performances) without prior written license from the U.S. Treasury Department, a time-consuming process that has intimidated promoters, producers and American travelers. Out-and-out tourism will not be permitted, but visitors from the U.S. will be allowed to spend more, use credit cards, and even bring home up to \$100 in Cuban cigars.

The removal of Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, as is currently under review, would presumably end the State Department security checks and visa denials that have led to last-minute cancellations of U.S. tours by Cuban groups. Though President Obama’s call for an end to the embargo is unlikely to gain congressional support, a less broad easing of commercial restrictions might permit American presenters to pay fees to Cuban artists, who are now allowed only per diem and travel reimbursements. Such changes might enable longer artistic residencies and collaboration on a grander scale, perhaps even an orchestra or institution based in both the U.S. and Cuba.

The past and present of American jazz and Cuban music intertwine in obvious ways. New York’s current jazz scene cannot be adequately described without highlighting the contributions of Messrs. Prieto and Terry, the sudden ubiquity of percussionists Román Díaz and Pedrito Martinez, and the innovations of some half-dozen other Cuban musicians, all now living in the U.S.

Likewise, musicians from the U.S. have long marked the Cuban scene. When I interviewed Mr. Valdés in his Havana home in 2010, one wall of his study was dotted with photos of storied Cuban musicians, including his father, the pianist Bebo Valdés, who died in 2013, and who played with American stars like Nat King Cole and Sarah Vaughan during his decadelong tenure as pianist and arranger at Havana’s famed Tropicana nightclub. “Cuban music and American jazz, that’s what we lived and breathed in my house,” Chucho told me. “I learned to play Jelly Roll Morton by listening to my father play.”

Some fear, reasonably, that an influx of tourism from the U.S. to Cuba may encourage the packaged nostalgia that often accompanies increased commercialism. Yet a freer exchange between musicians from both countries could rekindle energy akin to what Chucho Valdés grew up around.

And it may foster something yet deeper.

Pianist and bandleader Arturo O’Farrill learned of the current diplomatic breakthrough while in Havana, where he recorded an album combining his Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra with Cuban musicians, titled “The Conversation Continued.” Mr. O’Farrill, who was born in Mexico and raised on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, is the son of the Cuban composer, arranger and bandleader Chico O’Farrill. Arturo’s immersion in Cuban music began with a personal search for identity but now reflects a broader aesthetic mission that he sees as enabled by renewed relations.

“Now we can begin in earnest to have a healthy relationship in which Afro-Cuban music is not so exoticized,” Mr. O’Farrill said, “one in which we look at each other as inheritors of a common legacy, and as true partners.”

It remains to be seen whether diplomatic relations will, as President Obama announced, “begin a new chapter among the nations of the Americas.” But the policy changes already in motion may help turn such a page for the best jazz musicians of this hemisphere.

Mr. Blumenfeld writes about jazz for the Journal. He also blogs at blogs.artinfo.com/blunotes.

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