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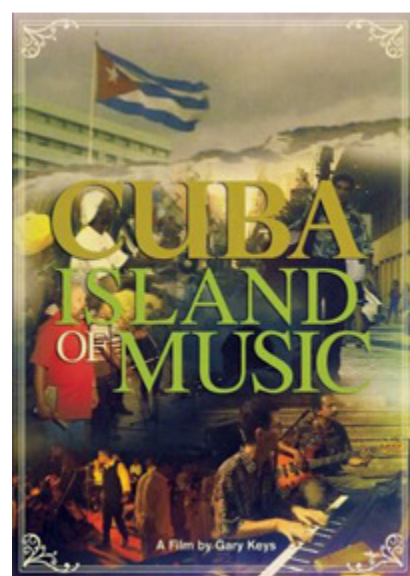
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Malecón Melodies in 'Cuba: Island of Music'

By **Terrence Butcher** 10 October 2011

One evening of couple years ago, I went to hear a discussion of Peter Moruzzi's book, *Havana Before Castro: When Cuba Was a Tropical Playground*, an elegant coffee table volume which arguably glorifies pre-revolution Cuba, intentionally or otherwise. As a rule, that fabled island's political situation inflames passions on both sides of the fence, and this talk proved no exception.

Two Cuban expats had a heated disagreement about the happiness quotient of their countrymen – those that haven't fled Fidel Castro's nanny state. Predictably, one denounced Castro and expressed sorrow for his former home, while the other insisted that Cuban citizens led lives of celebratory camaraderie. Both were eventually forced outside, and I later noticed two police



officers ascending the stairs as I left, so I assume the conflict grew more animated.

It would be simplistic to make sweeping generalizations about Cuba's national mood, but let me suggest that the truth inhabits an uneasy zone somewhere between. At least that's the impression given by Gary Keys' documentary *Cuba: Island of Music*, which isn't, as one might expect, a comprehensive history of that Afro-Spanish *mestizaje* which has produced Cuba's vibrant sounds, but instead an examination of how music is interwoven into the daily lives of Cubans, perhaps in the same manner that tourists and musicologists associate with New Orleans, or maybe echoing music's usage as everyday communication in traditional African villages.

Indeed, Keys announces early on his love of "Afrocentric music", and I challenge anyone to find another country in the Western hemisphere a better repository of this, with Brazil a possible exception. In fact, socio-culturally speaking, isn't Cuba an offshore microcosm of its sprawling South American neighbor? It's easy to spot the parallels. Both countries are intricate racial mosaics, products of Latinate conquest and overwhelming numbers of enslaved Africans, a combustible melange which produced thrilling music that would captivate First World listeners during the postwar era, stoking their dreams of sultry, romantic tropicalia, exemplified, in Cuba's case, by the suave Desi Arnaz, the world's most renowned pre-Castro Cuban.

An unsurprising generational divide also exists in musical preferences, as Brazil's younger generations spurn lush bossa nova for livelier genres, while older *cubanos* lament the marginalization of their beloved boleros by brassy, impudent salsa. It seems that the triumvirate of Havana-Salvador-New Orleans embodies a pan-Caribbean repository of Afro-European musical collaboration unmatched for its gumbo-like richness and diversity.

Stylistically, *Cuba: Island of Music* is a PBS-style travelogue, shot on videotape, and brimming with sunlit vistas of the Malecon and decrepit but mobile Detroit sedans, but Keys tries his best to stick to discussions of music and how his subjects have embraced performance as a sort of substitute for the affluence that Western-derived capitalism might have delivered to many of them. Watching this, one feels that ordinary Cubans have succumbed to *la vida* tropical, jettisoning the formalized rituals of imperial Spain, although Havana's ostentatious Spanish Colonial architecture reminds its denizens of earlier times, while ironically crumbling with age.

When Keys does venture into political waters, he makes the startling claim that the United States financed Castro's hostile 1959 coup. I'm no scholar of Cuban history, but such an action would seem contrary to American interests at the time, as dictator Fulgencio Batista was pro-American and in bed financially with stateside investors, some of them notorious mobsters – the saga of gangland associate Meyer Lansky is well-documented.

More troubling, Keys also questions whether Cubans are even oppressed, but any sane person would have to concede that open political dissent is outlawed. I'm willing to objectively dissect Cuban society, but can a nation governed primarily by one man since the Eisenhower administration truly be considered free? Methinks that Keys should curl up with a copy of Nestor Almendros' chilling *Nobody Listened*.

Cuba: Island of Music

Director: [Gary Keys](#)

Cast: Chico O'Farrill, Candido Camero, Billy Taylor

(Wienerworld; US DVD: 21 Jun 2011)

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Keys is on firmer ground as he focuses on local opinions and contextualizing of music's place in Cuban life, instead of using the pronouncements of faraway academics to take center stage. Personally, I confess to being a sucker for lofty professorial analyses, but it would be inappropriate here to allow the chattering classes to dominate, as many have never visited Cuba, whether by choice or hypocritical government mandate.

Still, romanticizing occasionally creeps in, as *Cuba: Island of Music* implies that contemporary Cuba is a social paradise devoid of racial divisions, a view disputed by journalist Eugene Robinson in *Last Dance In Havana*, his non-fiction treatise on today's Cuba. It's true that Castro abolished *de jure* racial discrimination on the island, but many young blacks in Cuba feel a subtle but increasing pressure from local police, and I'm not naïve enough to think their situation would improve if the right-wing Miami-based entrepreneurs ever come to power; that same *claque* may have been instrumental in a ban on Cuban performers playing in Miami-Dade County. On a lighter note, in one sequence, an elderly Chinese-Cuban – known as Mr. Lee – croons a paean to his adopted country in Spanish, explaining that he never imagined he would embrace Cuba, or vice versa, when he arrived decades before.

Keys also presents a lengthy montage of everyday homegrown industriousness, a sort of whistling while you work, that's uncomfortably reminiscent of Soviet-era propaganda movies, intended to promote cooperation within and convince the outside world that the USSR's brand of 'socialism' was an admirable model for others to follow. It also must be said that obese young people are apparently non-existent in Cuba, quite the opposite of my own country, but those tempted to attribute this to vigorous exercise and a lack of fast and processed foods might want to consider that low-level hunger is endemic on the island, as argued in Patrick Symmes' muckraking *Harper's* essay from last October, "Thirty Days As a Cuban".

The film asks the following question: Why is Cuba such an effective incubator of musical virtuosity? In the absence of material distractions, Cubans have had little else to focus on. It may be that Cuba's street corner karaoke is a covert, unconscious form of resistance, as it was for American slaves during the antebellum period, or may be now in Singapore's raucous nightclub scene. I would never compare prosperous Singapore's regulatory patriarchy to the inhumanity of slavery or unilateral, unyielding governance, but I'm merely saying that curtailing of freedoms in one area produces, for good or ill, spontaneous expression in another.

A few scenes would benefit from additional subtitles, but my only serious quip is the lack of extras in this DVD package. Might Keys have included some tidbits of Cuban history? What about an examination of differing musical styles? Or maybe clips of Cuban performers' appearances in Hollywood films? I suspect that budgetary concerns forestalled the inclusion of any bells and whistles.

Cuba remains, like so many other developing societies, a tragic-romantic melting pot which finds solace *and* sexuality in music. Inevitably, it will become more like Miami, that glittery, chaotic metropolis staring it down from a secure mainland perch. Afro-Cuban sounds have long been the island's principal export to North America, and Cubaphiles—many opposed to the US trade embargo – will consume Cuba, the Island of Music with relish. There aren't necessarily any fresh insights here, but the documentary may serve as another talking point in increasing calls for the US to normalize relations with its struggling former colony, so close yet so far.

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