

For Texas musicians, jazz is the bridge to Cuba

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HAVANA -- "Lessee, we've got some shirts, a pair of socks, some tacos." Clearing customs with a gang of musicians is seldom a streamlined process. So it is with this ragtag collection of music veterans, all of whom have their own ideas about propriety in the face of officialdom. But on this crisp December day, the process is running relatively smoothly. With the Havana Jazz Festival in sight, an undercurrent of excitement runs through the band -- members of Austin's Lucky 13 and the San Antonio natives in the horn section of the West Side Horns.

All have traveled overseas before. But none of them, save band leader Lucky Tomblin and his wife, Becky, and West Sider Spot Barnett, have journeyed to Cuba. American musicians, like Americans in general, have to jump through some hoops to surmount the U.S. government's decades-old embargo against travel to the island.

This group is traveling under the auspices of MedAid, an Austin-based organization that delivers donated medical supplies to Cuban hospitals and clinics with the blessings of both the Cuban and American governments. As an employee of a public relations firm that represents the nonprofit group and, separately, Lucky 13, I was along for the ride and my first trip to the 20-year-old jazz festival.

Thanks to a series of serendipitous encounters and a little friendly networking, Tomblin met some of the festival powers-that-be on an earlier MedAid-sponsored visit. He shared with them a copy of the band's album "Lucky Club Music." Lucky 13 with the West Side Horns were invited to perform at the festival held every other year in the Cuban capital.

There they joined other U.S. musicians, including Taj Mahal, jazz violinist Regina Carter and Roy Hargrove, on the festival bill.

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Havana Vieja, the oldest section of the city where the band is staying, looks something like New Orleans' French Quarter must have once appeared: a series of public plazas; graceful examples of colonial architecture that span a dozen European periods; a 250-year old cathedral; antique cobblestone streets through which squeeze the massive vintage American cars that give some streets in Havana the appearance of a misplaced low riders' convention.

With its meticulous restorations and manicured streets, Havana Vieja is the icing on the multilayered cake of the city of more than 2 million people. It is part of what lures the tourist dollars essential to the Cuban economy.

The jazz festival (which ran Dec. 11-15), and the film festival that immediately preceded it,

brought an additional influx of tourists from Europe, Canada and, yes, the United States. Most of the gringo tourists seemed tastefully reserved and discreetly appreciative. Who knows, maybe it's a jazz fan thing. It was left to the native Havana listeners, often fueled by Havana Club rum and Cristal beer, to supply much of the audience's joie de vivre.

Other sections of the city are not nearly as picturesque as the colonial quarter. Chronic shortages have been a way of life in Cuba for decades, and they have taken their inevitable toll. The Malecon, the gracefully curving seaside esplanade that parallels the Atlantic, has scores of venerable architectural facades, but the buildings behind them look as though they have been shelled with artillery. "This could be the jewel of the Caribbean," said Barnett, and he has the perspective to know. The West Side Horns sax man, 66, first came to Havana when he was 17. Havana blossomed then like a poisonous orchid under the not-so-tender ministrations of the dictator Batista, U.S. corporations such as United Fruit, and the American Mafia. Barnett was just taking his first steps on the road, playing with bandleader Ray Maldonado, when they came to the Cuban capital to perform and to soak up influences from the island's maestros.

"We wanted to see Perez Prado, Manteca, Xavier Cugat" and the other mambo kings who ruled the Cuban music scene in those days, Barnett recalled, noting that Maldonado's band played hits by Cugat, Prado and Cuban vocal prodigy Celia Cruz. "I remember the old days when there was only the rich and poor. Seeing everything move towards more equality makes my heart glad."

Of course Barnett, like the rest of the traveling party, could take away only surface impressions from the four-day trip in December. Although the Habaneros were uniformly friendly and relatively forthcoming, politics was off-limits as a topic of discussion.

Barnett sounded more knowledgeable and authoritative when he spoke about the music that pervades the city (and the word is pervades -- odds are that if you go to a mechanic to get your transmission repaired, there will be a son band bopping away in the corner of the garage). "The music is better than I remember it," he said. "There's more dedication. They live and breathe music, 24/7, and that's what makes them so good. This is the most musical situation I've ever been in in my life."

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The jazz festival itself seemed light-years away from the daily grind of regimentation and rationing that is the Habaneros' habitual lot. Although it's heavily populated by gringo tourists, tickets were priced at 10 Cuban pesos (roughly 5 cents U.S.) to encourage local attendance. Mixing native Cubans and foreign tourists in a cultural setting is one of the festival's acknowledged goals.

"There's always been a closeness between Cuban and American cultures," said Roberto Falcon through an interpreter. One of the original directors of the Havana Jazz Festival, Falcon paused in his endless peregrinations long enough to laud the festival as a source of international cross-pollination.

"We want to keep growing," Falcon said. "The first two years of the festival, we featured only

Cuban acts. Then, in the third year, we invited one Brazilian band and one act from the U.S., and it's been an international festival ever since. Chucho has helped get the word out about the festival among American acts, too."

"Chucho" is Chucho Valdes, the festival's musical figurehead and Grammy-winning composer and bandleader. As Duke Ellington was seminal in American jazz, so Valdes is equally revered among his countrymen. As it happened, Lucky 13 and the West Side Horns' 40-minute set was slotted right before Valdes' closing performance at the outdoor plaza of the Casa de la Cultura, the festival's headquarters. Unlike other sites involved in the Havana festival -- including Teatro Karl Marx and Teatro Nacional de Cuba -- the performance space at Casa de la Cultura is open to the stars.

Music fans who have attended New Orleans' Jazz & Heritage Festival would feel right at home at Casa de la Cultura. There was the same soft, tropical air, the same ambient, al fresco feeling of music permeating the open air, the same emotional malleability that follows judicious (and not so judicious) applications of alcohol.

An afternoon rain had lent a steamy tropical patina to the evening as the band swung into its six-song set of San Antonio-style Tex-Mex R&B, meat-and-potatoes guitar-driven rock, mariachi-style norteño-style horns and some improvisational stylings.

In contrast to the improvisational permutations and expositional meanderings of some of the other jazz performers, the tightly honed arrangements and big-band horns punched rowdy holes in the night, to the alternate bemusement and delight of the crowd. At least one group of Cubans stood in the outdoor bleachers, bopping in time and passing a bottle of rum. The Lucky 13 band members onstage seemed equally bemused and delighted. By any yardstick, it was a long way from San Antonio's west side.

Perhaps that musical exchange reflected the attitudes the Cubans and the Texans brought to the experience: a certain bemusement, guarded friendliness, boundless curiosity, inevitable misconceptions, and, ultimately, a growing regard, expressed imperfectly across a divide that will only diminish with time.