

## Cuban Headbangers and the Fight for Freedom

Metal is music that stands for a nothing is sacred credo and so opposes all types of restrictions while rejecting authority. The tribe that shares the Metal philosophy worldwide embraces freedom, loyalty, and resistance. Some have the privilege to express freely. Some have to contend the exercise of this Art form under oppressive regimes. So is the case of Cuban metalheads.

Certainly, since its arrival as the anti-establishment teenage anthem in the 1950s, rock and roll meant change. But one thing is to be grounded by parents who dislike your music. The other is to be persecuted, imprisoned, and/or live in fear because of what it represents.

The relative short distance between Cuba and the USA (more or less 100 miles from Key West to northern shores), allowed for intense cultural exchange prior to the Revolucion Cubana (1959). Artists such as Frank Sinatra performed in the Tropicana's Casino. It is a popular legend that other stars like Bill Haley visited in the 1950s as tourists, but did not perform. Allegedly, Casinos were mob owned, and the mob preferred crooners to rockers.

Rock arrives in Cuba through iconic rock and roll movies such as Blackboard Jungle and Rebel Without a Cause in 1955. The first Cuban rockers were Los Vampiros and Los Satelites, which were basically bands composed by African Cuban members in the style of Limbo dance music and that mostly played Spanish versions of established rock and roll hits- like the band Los Teen Tops was doing in Mexico. Soloist singers of the initial era included Luisito Bravo, Rogelio Sanzarini and Jorge Bauer.

Although Fulgencio Batista did not see Rock with good eyes, Fidel Castro made it clear that Rock music was the music of the enemy which carried corrupt North American imperialism. When Castro takes over and Batista escapes to the United States in 1959, profound cultural changes and violent repression, including massive firing squad executions, take place against anything that may be considered counter revolutionary. Castro officially banned rock and roll in 1961. But, as Alan Freed and Twisted Sister may say, you cannot stop Rock and Roll.

Many bands developed during the first prohibition era such as Los Kent, Los Pacifico, Los Violentos, Los Dan, Los Llopis, and Los Zafiros. The regime then tried to re-direct youth taste with a radio show called Nocturno, airing European pop and light rock such as Italian Rita Pavonne, and Spanish bands Los Brincos, Los Bravos and, perhaps Spain greatest pop singer of all times, Raphael.

The first Cuban rock and roll prohibition ends in 1965. But, worse is yet to come.

The same year, mimicking the Russian Gulag, "Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción" (1965) were installed in Camaguey Province. Anybody that did not fit the Communist standard idea of a revolucionario, such as homosexuals, "extravagant clothing and hairdo wearers" (by far the definition of any average teenager in the world), free thinkers, were sent to forced labor and indoctrination to re-program their minds back into the "Revolucion" mode. In the meantime, Nueva Cancion or Nueva Trova, expressed by the music of Silvio Rodriguez, Pablo Milanés become musical ambassadors of the dictatorship.

The installation of Congreso Nacional de Educacion y Cultura in 1971 continues the persecution of youth "infectados de diversionismo ideologico". (1) In the 70's, a radio show "Buenas Tardes Juventud" in

Havana, broadcasted music by Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix. Moreover, just like American teenagers found on smaller radios a gateway to clandestine listening to parentally forbidden rock and roll airwaves, curious and courageous Cuban youngsters would congregate in the shores, bring their soviet made portable radios, and tune into the top 100s of stations such as “1070s WQAM, WGBS hailing from Florida and KAAY of Little Rock Arkansas” (2). They would agree on a station and the cumulative volume of several radios would provide loudness for their rock and roll asylum. That way they learned the sounds of ACDC, Joan Jett, Ozzy Osbourne. When Cuban police would show up, teens would jump in the water to escape punishment.

These stations provided the name of what was called “generacion doblu” or “double u generation”, and may have weighted on the decision of thousands of Cuban citizens to flee the island risking their life crossing the ocean in small ships or massively as the invasion in the Peruvian embassy in 1980 (10,000 Cuban citizens in a 2,000 square meter space building plus gardens).

In the late 1970s, Jorge Martinez starts RED in Municipio Playa, which some consider to be the first Metal band. RED scores radio hits such as “Burocracia”, “La Nueva Historia”, and “Murcielagos”.

In the 1980s, Cuban metal players whose families had emigrated to the USA, were topping the charts. Juan Croucier (1959, Santiago de las Vegas) playing bass with Ratt, Dokken, Quiet Riot; Dave Lombardo (1965, La Habana) drumming for Slayer, Suicidal Tendencies, the Misfits; Tico Torres (New Yorker whose parents Emma and Hector were born in Cuba) drumming for Bon Jovi; and, Rudy Sarzo (1950, La Habana) playing bass with Quiet Riot, Ozzy Osbourne, Whitesnake, Dio, Yngwie Malmsteen’s Rising Force, Blue Oyster Cult, The Guess Who, and more iconic Rock bands. Their success provided inspiration to the Metal movement back in the island.

In December 1988, two brave women, Maria Gattorno and Rosalia Macias, opened a cultural venue close to the intersection of 37 and Paseo Streets in Havana. Defying the regime, the venue, which eventually became to be known as “Patio de Maria”, hosted metal shows until 2003. (3)

Zeus band belongs to the 80s generation. Their story of resilience is brilliantly expressed in the recent documentary “Los Ultimos Frikis” (2019) directed by Nicholas Brennan and scored by Dave Lombardo. Vocalist Diony Arce suffered six years of internment.

When media censors Rock music, alternative venues open to satisfy the demand. Such is the case of Metal fanzine Scriptorium, which was founded in 1999 by twin brothers Michell and Alex Sanchez - both now exiled in Houston, Texas. Scriptorium has had a two-decade run acting also as reproduction label for the music their readers love.

As stated by “Los Ultimos Frikis” and by musicians Joel Kaos of Ancestor (formed in Havana in 2005) and Juan Torrente of Combat Noise (Havana , 1995) , legendary Brazilian metal band Sepultura performance in 2003 in Cuba was very influential in the development of the 2000s generation of thrash and death metal bands.

Extreme metal provided a natural advantage. Government inspectors could not stand the loudness at the shows, leaving them mostly alone. The guttural sound of the vocal style provided that anti-establishment lyrics could fly under the radar. As a result, a wave of Black Metal and thrash bands such as Medium, Chlover, Unlight Domain, From the Graves, Mephisto, Scythe, Congregation, Demencia, Dawn of Madness, Narbeleth, Abbadon, and many more take over the metal scene.

One can only wonder if Black Metal finds cultural collaboration with Santeria. Santeria is a syncretic religion, a Yoruba tradition originally from West Africa that merges with Roman Catholic elements. Although an atheist Communist regime, the Castors allowed Santeria to exist as a social valve. The underground invocation of deities and ferocious drumming seems to feed the tonality of Cuban metal bands that align with the dark side. This merits further curiosity and research.

Asociacion Hermanos Saiz and Agencia Cubana de Rock were created by the government to control artists. As a de facto reaction, artists learned to use the agencies to open doors. Combat Noise vocalist Juan Torrente, who enjoys a privileged bassus grave or bajo profundo voice, has traveled the world singing as a member of Cuban iconic chorus ensemble Coro Entrevoces. In 2014, Coro Entrevoces provided back up for the song "You Can't Always Get What You Want" at the Rolling Stones concert at Ciudad Deportiva Open Air en La Habana. Joel Kaos at one point worked in Asociacion Hermanos Saiz as a sort of "double agent". While he was supposed to keep the scene under control, he was promoting and supporting metal musicians.

Repression continues. "Los Ultimos Frikis" clearly shows musicians are still intimidated to declare openly on their situation. It is well known that the government does punish artists that state opinions or information that they may not like. It may affect immigrant's family members who stay behind - their professional careers, livelihoods and overall well-being. As recent as 2008, Gorki Aguila, a member of Porno Para Ricardo was arrested. The charge was "dangerousness". Dangerousness is an actual law that allows authorities to detain people who they may think could commit crimes even though they have not committed them yet. Yes, as you hear it, an innocent individual can legally be imprisoned as a criminal without having committed any crimes.

In 2013, nu metal band Escape, black thrash metal band Ancestor, and death metal band Agonizer were invited to SXSW Music Conference in Austin, Texas. While in the States, they requested asylum in the United States. Ancestor is called now Ancestor of Kaos and is based in Las Vegas, Nevada. Escape and Agonizer are based now in Miami, Florida.

Some of the information in this article was obtained using Facebook as the only way of communication with some of the artists. Skype is still banned in Cuba. If Metal ever stood against injustice, it is an honor for me to have dedicated this few lines to real brave metal warriors who may be reading this lines and wondering when it will be safe to go back home.

(1) La generacion "dobliu" (W). Enrique Collazo, Denzel Martinez, 2006)

(2) La generacion "dobliu" (W). Enrique Collazo, Denzel Martinez, 2006)

(3) "El Patio de Maria". Documental by Agencia de Rock de Cuba.

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