



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Havana Jam: May, 2001

John McCluskey

Callaloo, Volume 26, Number 1, Winter 2003, pp. 92-96 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2003.0021>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39841>



Photo by John McCluskey, Jr.

Entering Old Havana

---

---

## HAVANA JAM May, 2001

*by John McCluskey, Jr.*

We were finally on board the plane to Havana. My wife Audrey and I took our seats in a row about a third of the way to the rear of the charter. I strapped myself in the window seat and slowly exhaled. We had been warned that customs at Miami International Airport could be a gauntlet for those traveling to and from Cuba. We would be searched and re-searched, our bags rifled by attendants opposed to the Castro government, we were told. Yet aside from having to be at check-in several hours in advance and endure an agonizingly slow line of passengers, there were no real problems. It was the *anticipation* of hassles that made the morning tense until I heard the click of the secure seat belt.

Around us in the cabin was the edgy music of conversations composed of equal blends of excited English and Spanish. From the row behind me I overheard one woman mention to another that this was her first trip home in thirty years. Audrey and I were traveling to the conference sponsored by *Callaloo* and Casa de las Américas. There would be a dozen or so Afro-Americanists to dialogue with each other and Cuban writers. I had recognized some of the names on the list of American conferees, but saw no familiar faces on the plane. I would learn later that, except for one other person, those from the eastern United States took the Miami warning seriously and arrived from other ports.

From a remote runway, we took off exactly on time. During the low flight path over the Keys and the Straits of Florida, I tried to imagine Havana. I carried with me images from guidebooks, from newspaper travel sections, from a half-dozen visits to Miami. A colleague at Indiana University had furnished me with a supply of book and article titles regarding Cuban history and the African presence in Cuban culture. I located an Afro-Cuban website. Just before the trip I had hauled out Amiri Baraka's early collection, *Home*. I remembered parts of its first essay, "Cuba Libre," a description of a journey to Cuba taken by an entourage of Afro-American writers and politicians. The year was 1960, just after the rebels had consolidated their triumph. I had remembered the essay as one of poignant, humorous and biting analysis, and it worked that way during the recent reading. For most of the flight, all these images and descriptions marched through my mind. I watched the Atlantic below, green in its shallowness, for I could make out the valleys and plains beneath the surface of the water. From charter boats I had fished in the Gulf Stream on several occasions and recalled it to be a very dark blue. Yet even the deeper water seemed placid that morning, nothing to bother, say, a descendant of Hemingway's Santiago or the forlorn sailor in Winslow Homer's

"The Gulf Stream." I had heard the standard news about the economy, about blackouts and the long lines of customers to stores with near-empty shelves. By the time we approached Havana over farmland, I had concluded that I had no conclusions—I really didn't know what to expect—and that my course for the week would be to learn as much from as many Cuban people as I could about how they lived and viewed their lives.

During the three days before the beginning of the conference, we had a chance to see some of Old Havana. We had plans to travel to the mountains in the southeast, but had to drop those plans. From the first afternoon on we walked the neighborhoods in all directions from our hotel, the Presidente. I was instantly recognized as an Americano negro, no matter which hat or cap I wore, no matter if my camera had been left behind. In most instances this led to some good-natured joking. ("Americano negro, where you from?" "I'm from Chicago," I lied, guessing the young man, leaning against a storefront might recognize Chicago before Bloomington, Indiana. "Si, Chicago. You know Michael Jordan?" "Oh, si. Me and Michael Jordan like this." I raised two fingers to show the closeness with which I hung with the rich and famous.) On a much later occasion during that first visit to Old Havana, three young men walked along and talked from the other side of the street. I had refused their offer for some "great Cuban cigars" with just a shake of my head and a weary wave of the hand. "Senor, where you from?" "Colombia," I said. "If you from Colombia, say something in Spanish." The four of us laughed loudly well into the next block. My bluff had been called.

We toured the cigar factory, *Fábrica de Tabacos Partagás*, one of the most famous on the island, noted for the wonderful *Cohiba* cigars. Recalling James Weldon Johnson's account of a cigar factory in his *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, I was eager to see the readers, *lectores* who read the news or novels or plays while the cigars are being rolled by the hands of the *torcadores*, the men and women who worked in a large and high-ceilinged room. The *lector* was on break during the time we toured the main room, however. Our guide was a young man who looked like he could have walked right out of Cleveland. As we shook hands, my impulse was to call him "Bay-bay" or "J.T." Walking with him, I was often at the head of a line of tourists, and we had a chance to talk in snatches. He too asked where I was from and nodded slowly when I said Chicago. He was proud of his work and said those who worked in the factory were well-paid relative to other workers in the city. At the end of the tour, he tapped me on the back of a hand with a fresh cigar. "It is yours. Enjoy. The kind Fidel smokes." Then he moved on to introduce himself to the next group of tourists.

I grew up in a steel-mill town in southern Ohio. When I returned for vacations from college and beyond, I could gauge the economic health of the town by the number of men between the ages of eighteen and thirty who would be on the street during weekday afternoons. This was not exactly social science, but I was generally right about the effects of boom-bust cycles of the major mills in town. I have been weaned from that knee-jerk response to new towns and cities, but not entirely. I did not see many Afro-Cubans and particularly Afro-Cuban males as clerks or as supervisors. The young men were on the street. I wondered whether I would have seen the same thing some years before when the economy was said to be healthier. I had noticed, too,

that the largest new buildings under construction were hotels with posters advertising Japanese or Canadians as sponsors. Would the young men get jobs in the large hotels? Even if they did, would the revolution, like a locomotive, stall in the sand of service industry? However, simultaneous with the sifting through these notions, I was struck time and again by the morale of the people, the laughter and directness. (I know, I know, this sounds dangerously close to a view of someone slumming in, say, Harlem. One afternoon from the top floor of the Museum of the Revolution I readied my telescopic lens, already proud of the panorama of rooftops I was about to take. Before I finished setting up the angles, a young woman walked to catch the air from a roof shanty. She was several buildings away, leaning over the edge of the roof. I focused on her as she turned. In the final photo, dimmed by shadow unfortunately, she is smiling back at the camera with a thumbs-up sign. That spontaneous and small gesture in the face of the stranger was just one of many I use to offer my case.) We accept contradictions in our own communities; that may be what we truly mean when we talk about the blues impulse. A novice to international travel, I learn we must accept contradictions elsewhere, as well. (As a young James Baldwin once pointed out, however, acceptance is not resignation.) And it certainly makes futile any reach to hold onto exotica.

I look back on the week as a sensual and intellectual feast. Each morning I would start my jog from the hotel to the Malecón, the pocked seawall three blocks away. Across the street at a school named for poet-patriot José Martí, uniformed children would be in the courtyard singing. At the corner I would pass one of the many young guards in brown stationed at many corners in Old and New Havana. By the time I crossed the busy boulevard, it would occur to me that I was never early enough to escape the heat. I studied the driving habits and smiled to myself at a remembered line, a line from the Liberty City district in Miami told so often it sounded like some grave truth: "He drives like a Cuban." This was told no doubt out of pique at the growing number of strangers in that city and a perceived favoritism. But in Havana there was order on the boulevard, cars giving space to the many bicycles, the wives or girlfriends sitting on the backs and dressed for work while the husband or boyfriend pumped steadily. At the seawall I would turn right and east toward Old Havana or west toward an observation point which jutted into the ocean. In either event, I would jog two-three miles down and return. There was always the sea to one side of me. On the old seawall, three feet wide or so, there would be couples talking, hugging. There would be someone just looking at the horizon to the north. But always, always, there would be music, someone strumming a guitar or playing a conga or just a capella singing the sun a bit higher in the soft blue morning sky. And there would be the music from the second floor of apartment buildings, in the front yards, from radios and cassette tapes (Our visits to the music clubs confirmed what American jazz fans had long known—Cuba is still a hotbed of musical talent. One does not say, "That performance was good for a Cuban." We heard a fourteen-year old trumpet player who could give more experienced players the "shakes".)

The conference was opened by a quartet—two Afro-Americans (piano and tenor sax) and two Cubans (bass and drums)—and these players lit up the night. After one extended rehearsal that very afternoon, the quartet jelled nicely with solos that locked

like bright arabesques. The drummer, a nineteen-year old with a long feather dangling from a pendant in one ear, offered solos that brought the audience to its feet time and again. The concert was a perfect opening for the conference and a model of dynamic dialogues.

The three days of the conference were spirited with discussions of academic and artistic trends in African-American writing. The Cubans in the audience were far more bilingual than the Americans, though the more scholarly panels made use of translators. The sessions were best when the audience joined in and we learned together, when we jammed upon a theme accessible to all. So often American academic assumptions—resources for travel, computers, bursting libraries—were brought up short. We could not take plentiful resources for granted. We could appreciate improvisation, however (how do you teach or distribute your work with less?). Also, we could think of ways to invite fellow poets and scholars to our campuses. Indeed we can develop and enlarge a community of scholars in the Black Diaspora. The last evening of the conference was given over to doing exactly that. On the large front porch of the hotel, the exchange of addresses and plans for computer distribution were gratifying last acts.

On the last afternoon before leaving Havana, we joined a poet in the apartment of a film-maker. We had met Gloria, the film-maker, in Indiana just three months earlier. That afternoon we talked of the fiction and poetry reading by Cubans and Afro-Americans the night before. Again, there had been no translators for the poetry and fiction readers, and, for those who could not speak the other's language, we would have to be content to trust the rhythm of a foreign tongue. That afternoon Gloria translated our conversation with the poet who told us about her sons, one in America, and her growing up in Matanzas. We talked of travel between Cuba and the States and the effects of the U.S. embargo. We had seen the clear effects of the embargo during our short time there and were incensed by the policy. Audrey and I agreed to forward a request for medicines once we returned home. Gloria's mother was ailing and the specific medicine she needed was in short supply in Havana. We talked about the difficulty of getting funds to make films and later for sub-titles for broader distribution. We talked about the reasons more Afro-Cubans do not take advantage of free higher education, about the reasons for so few Afro-Cubans in the higher echelons of government. We shared stories of family, of history and the meaning of progress. Then the week—the light, the music, the eruptions of laughter from decaying buildings, the frame of a calming sea—crystallized in her clear look after a sip of green tea.

"Life in Cuba is hard, but we support the goals of the revolution."

Where do you go from that? We were in Havana on a graying Saturday afternoon among decaying, leaning buildings and heard a direct—no way glib, no way forced—statement on secular commitment. We nodded and sipped our tea. "Revolution" carried weight; here it was both a fact and a promise.

We left for Miami the next day, again expecting a hassle at the Miami airport and again getting none to the relieved astonishment of my in-laws. We are eager to return to Havana, perhaps the best indicator of the richness of the experience. What do I yearn to see next time? The Sierra Maestra and Santiago to the southeast where the revolution began. Matanzas to the east where a friend who visits there twice a year

---

---

## CALLALO

---

---

claims it is to Cuba what Salvador is to Brazil—Africa very much alive and up in the face of the West. Yes, I would want to fish off the coast and land a boatload of red snappers. To locate the gyms where the next wave of Cuban Olympic boxers will be trained. To a baseball game. To attend a program by the National Ballet. To learn Cuban Spanish, then dare to translate a poem by Guillén or by one of the poets who read Thursday night, to struggle with a novel chapter by Alejo Carpentier and discover its union of meaning and music. To talk with more people in the city and the countryside. Yes, I want to re-visit a place only introduced during a week in a *glorioso* May.



**During a Walk in Havana**

**Photo by John McCluskey, Jr.**



**Refurbished 1950s American Cars Are Seen All Over Cuba**

Photo by Marcia Minter



Photo by Marcia Minter



Photo by Charles H. Rowell



Photo by Marcus D. Jones



Photo by Marcia Minter

Original Colonial Architecture of Old Habana