

# Cuba: the Beat Goes on

by Ella Waldman

Cuba is like an ageing mansion in slow, dilapidated decline. Among the mildew that forms archipelagos on the exterior walls, one can see its faded beauty and the promise of glorious beginnings.

The heart and soul of Cuba is Havana, and its elegant and impressive history is seen at every turn; the sculpted, carved splendor of its buildings, and the colorful, yet peeling buildings create the ambience of an art house film from a classic European New Wave director.

The challenge I faced was to photograph today's Cuba, a place that has emerged from an achingly long siesta and inspires one to survey the splendid combination of both the past and the present, and drenching up all the possibilities of a remarkable future.

Arriving in Havana is like stepping back into the 1950s. Despite the daily difficulties of life in a communist country, the Cubans have managed to create a vibrant culture that enshrines the small pleasures of life: music, dancing, rum and cigars. Without any doubt, music is the essential foundation

of this culture, infusing the country with an intense rhythm of music and dances. It is a lively mix of lyrical traditions and soulful Spanish melodies, as well as pulsating African beats and drumming.

During my visit to the island no one raised an eyebrow when

a group of young people started dancing in the streets with an enjoyment to make Martha and the Vandellas proud. In fact, people join in and prayed that this impromptu celebration of life would never end. Older people pulled up chairs in the entrance of their

homes, or simply sat on the exterior stoops and watch others coming-and-going, and this is how so many Cubans pass the time.

As the days passed, we plunged deeper into the human experience. We met warm, happy, hospitable people, who had fallen in love with the American flag and have embraced it warmly, wearing it on their clothing or hanging it in their homes.

Manicure culture has become a sought-after art form and

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many women spend their time and what little money they have to cultivate their appearance.

On one of the bus rides, torrential rain was falling outside, and we passed by a sports field; the cheers that we heard from the fields made us stop.

A surreal spectacle unfolded before our eyes ... a football match in the pouring rain, the whole field like a giant tub full of water, with a bunch of boys running and kicking a tattered ball with great joy. Some of them were wearing only one shoe but who was counting? What mattered was their exuberance, and nothing could spoil their fun. We jumped off the bus, our cameras ready to photograph them; every moment in the rain was worth it.

We also saw people working in professions that no longer exist. When was the last time you came across an umbrella repairman or someone who fixes disposable lighters? Have you ever seen a pig slaughtered in the middle of the street while life goes on as usual around it, with only two children who couldn't keep their



eyes off the spectacle?

Cuba believes in the slogan: "A bicycle for every worker," and only a few people can afford to own a private vehicle. Most of these are American cars, the newest of which is a 1959 model, and since these get stuck on almost every corner, the drivers are also seasoned auto mechanics by necessity.

Of course, you can't talk about Cuba without mentioning the vibrant, lively museum of colorful cars whose owners polish them tirelessly, putting a broad smile on the faces of the many tourists who have begun to invade this paradise, a world that is disappearing as relations with the United States warm up.

As Cuba opens up to the world, it will lose its charm, its authenticity and its innocence.

This visit allowed me to dive deeper into the local culture, to get a taste of the real daily life there. It opened a window and allowed me to penetrate the veil on things to reach a deeper layer that's often hidden to "ordinary" travelers.









