

## Kennedy Center Festival Features Cuban Performance Arts - Arturo O’Farrill is interviewed

By Tom Whitney, June 2018

National Public Radio called it ‘An unprecedented cultural bridge.’ For over two weeks in May the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washing presented its program called “*Artes de Cuba: from the Island to the World*.” It was a festival of dancers, theater, visual art and music. In all, 400 Cuban performers were there, including some Cuban-Americans. The Kennedy Center staged a total of 50 events or presentations, plus extras like live jam sessions that were free. The *tour de force* celebrated “Cuba’s Spanish, African and indigenous influences, and its long history of musical exchange with the U.S.” It was the “first of its kind in the U.S.,” the report said.

The Washington Post gave relatively scant coverage of the festival. Indeed the mainstream media’s treatment of the festival throughout the United States and in Europe was feeble and flawed, according to a journalist in Havana. The reports, he said, were fragmentary and here and there interspersed with political and other kinds of distractions. The strings on guitars and violins used by student musicians in Cuba were telephone wires, readers were told. Other examples: Cuban-American congresspersons had complained to the State Department about the influx of Cubans, and reports pointed to under-representation of Cuban American artists.

Actually it was the Afro-Latin Jazz orchestra, based in New York, that closed out the Cuban Arts festival at the Kennedy Center. The director of that ensemble, recognized as playing at a high level in the U.S. and international jazz world, is pianist Arturo O’Farrill, son of the famous Cuban-born jazz trumpeter Chico O’Farrill.

NPR journalist Marisa Arbona-Ruiz interviewed Arturo O’Farrill before his Afro-Latin Jazz orchestra performed. The band leader’s remarks reflect values and beliefs. They speak of a hopeful future of decent relations between the United States and Cuba and most certainly of a tight bond between the two peoples. He also has something to say about the U.S. economic blockade of the island.

**Marisa Arbona-Ruiz** asked, “Why is Kennedy Center’s Artes De Cuba festival important?”

**Arturo O’Farrill:** It’s huge for The Kennedy Center to have this kind of festival with this kind of investment. This kind of level of involvement in artistry is unheard of. And it sends a message to the current administration and to the public that Cuba and the United States are madly in love, there was a very unpleasant divorce, but there’s still a lot of love there. And the divorce was one of those things that you can’t go back in time and unravel all the elements of. All you can do is hope that you can find a way to salvage the love that’s there and even build upon it. There’s so many things about us besides just music and sports. It’s the common access to African heritage.

**MAR:** You released *Cuba: the Conversation Continues*, which was recorded in Havana 48 hours after President Obama announced his plan to normalize relations with Cuba in

December of 2014. You were invited to witness the U.S. flag-raising over the new U.S. residence and the Cuban Embassy in Havana eight months later. What was your reaction to those monumental changes then compared to what's happening now, as both countries have new leaders with more hard-lined approaches to the relationship?

**AOF:** You know, everything happens in slow motion when you see miracles taking place or dreams being realized. I will always remember sitting in the synagogue in (the Cuban neighborhood) Vedado where we were rehearsing and watching this unfold, and kind of in a very slow malaise, not really believing it. Show me the money!

You gotta understand, you can talk all the talk you want [but] the barbaric economic embargo that has destroyed my people is still in place. And it was in place then, even as President Obama — God bless him — promised that it would be dismantled. And so I don't think people realize that the embargo is not only a stranglehold on an already freakishly poor nation but it's perilous. So when the announcement was made, it was greeted with a fair amount of weariness on the part of the Cuban people and myself. For a second it looked like my people would have a chance to create a different future for themselves. I was very emotional. I was also very emotional for my father because I could see that he would've been in tears if he had lived to see that day.

**MAR:** And now?

**AOF:** Nothing's really changed now that we're back in this terrible dark epoch in American history. They've kind of decided they're going to tighten the rules and then kind of pay more attention to who goes in and out of Cuba. The truth of the matter is that one of the worst aspects of what's happening now is that Americans are scared to go to Cuba. They're frightened and they think it's somehow much harder. Consequently the tourism that had surfaced after the President Obama and President Castro announcement was deeply healthy. Despite the economic embargo Cubans were opening up restaurants and things. Now people are staying away from Cuba because it's just a little more difficult to go back.

Also, under President Trump, the State Department has been decimated. There are no diplomats or State Department workers in Cuba. You can't get a visa there. The Kennedy Center knows this better than anyone else. If Cubans want to go work in the United States, they have to go to another country that has a working consulate to get the visas. This is horrendous!

**MAO:** Where do you think the musical relationship between the U.S. and Cuba is headed?

**AOF:** The kernel that is rhythmically germane to Cuban music is also there in jazz. The harmonic sophistication that we attribute to jazz has always been in Cuban songs, and in Latin American songs, throughout history. So I hope we stop exoticizing Cubans and that Cubans stop holding jazz up to some sort of pedestal and instead we just sort of accept the fact that we both owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the cataclysm of the slave trade. And that's really where we begin to level the playing field. At the root of all of this is Afro-Yoruban rhythms that really shaped everything from hip-hop to reggaeton to salsa to jazz.

**MAO:** What would you like to see for Cuba and for the U.S.?

**AOF:** Cubans are modern; they're vibrant, they're at the apex of many of the arts – some of the best dancers on the planet, some of most consummate composers, world class pianists, actors, choreographers. I mean, [it's not] cigar-chomping, fatigue-wearing, 1957 Chevy-driving — the way that a lot of people would like to look at Cuba. I would like for Cuba to stop being seen as the nostalgic playground of the 1950s [and] to be accorded its full weight as a modern and relevant people: relevant to U.S. and relevant to the world.

What I would like for the U.S. is a wish list that's three miles long. I love this country. I love my block. I love Brooklyn. I love walking out and seeing Muslim people next to Orthodox Jewish people, next to gay people, next to straight people, next to women, next to men, next to old, next to young, next to poor, next to rich. That to me is the United States and it looks like that sometimes in Cuba. But I wish that that part of the United States would look the same way throughout the United States ... That everywhere in this great land of ours, people would embrace that kind of difference and diversity and not fear it.