

Just Like A Good Jazz Solo-My Trip to Cuba

In my early musical career, I recall hearing Claudio Roditi weave through the changes in one of his trumpet solos. His furious and fluid lines flowed out of his bell with effortless beauty. As a developing trumpet player, I tried to emulate that exciting style, only to find myself losing my train of thought and tangling up my fingers. Then I heard Chet Baker: not as dense, more relaxed, creating anticipation with an intelligent use of “space”. Dizzy Gillespie once told an aspiring student that, just as in jazz, to appreciate any experience, you have to “think slow”.

My recent travel experience showed me the difference between a full agenda and letting the experience come to me. I am traveling to Cuba with 5 other friends. We have our arsenal of 21st century software innovations: Facebook Messenger, Whatsapp and Instagram to keep us “connected”. But Cuba is frozen in the 20th century. For better or worse, the Cuban revolution in 1959, led by Che and Fidel, booted out hotel owners, mob bosses and seized private property. No longer were foreign countries going to pilfer Cuba’s resources. Cuba had the opportunity to influence its own course of history.

The Revolution of 1959 brought promise for Cubans whose history has always been controlled by foreign governments, repression and reliance on other countries for the basic necessities of life. But the revolutionary expectations, juxtaposed with the facades of gray, stained and dilapidated buildings in “Habana Vieja”, are dichotomous. Many buildings appeared to be on the verge of collapse, yet between the crumbling partitions were hints of habitation: clothes hanging out to dry or a glimpse of a human quickly passing by an entrance with no door. One of our drivers told us the rainy season is the most dangerous. An entire family was killed as the weight of the rain caused the roof of the building to collapse upon them.

At night, we spent many dinners together, savoring the Cuban food and laughing about the day’s experiences with incredible art and music. One person in our party was celebrating her birthday, so we sang happy birthday at each restaurant we visited, just because each dinner was a new experience. The lack of Internet access meant we had to focus on each other. We had no choice.

Many of the restaurants in “Old Havana” are filled with the music of phenomenal musicians. To the average tourist, that may not be of any particular importance, but having been a music educator for 32 years and owning my own music publishing business, I was floored by their virtuosity. I could empathize when, between sets, the musicians sold their CDs for extra income. You see, just like in America and other countries where there are impoverished communities, music and sports are a way out; a chance to earn a respectable living and gain notoriety. The Cuban government selects only the most gifted artists and athletes to travel the world, making Cuba one big “Talent Showcase” and baseball farm league.

As we were so involved in taking in the experience, it dawned on me midweek that I hadn't heard the latest political diatribe and hyperbole or the recent sports updates. Who was still in the basketball playoffs? Did the Giants beat the Dodgers or visa versa? (I'll stay neutral on that one.) Once we figured out how to access the Internet, one of us read on Facebook, a day after it happened, that Prince has passed away. What?!?!

Some of us became a little more proficient in Spanish, including yours truly (not that it was good beforehand), while the educators in our group will take the experience and mold it into their next lesson plans.

Despite the hardships they face, the Cuban people we met treated us with genuine kindness. They were helpful when we needed it. In one instance, our female host walked with us through the neighborhood at 4:00 a.m., helped us negotiate a cab fare, and rode with us to the point of departure for our bus trip to Matanzas. It balanced out the experience of being besieged by desperate individuals trying to feed their families or living in extreme poverty.

The Cuban Revolution may have frozen the Cuban infrastructure in time and left the Cuban people with very little in the way of luxuries, but just like a good jazz solo, sometimes “less is more”.