

When did you come to Havana and what was your first reaction, feelings...especially coming from the USA.

I first went to Havana two years ago because of its colorful musical heritage.

We were there filming a sizzle for a TV show idea, my production partner and I came up with.

We were also very curious in finding out about the Hip Hop scene and other genres of music that are not too known since there is very little information coming from the island.

Our expectation of Cuba, and the music scene, was very high.

I was personally very curious to experience it first hand because of the knowledge that a lot of information coming out of this country is very distorted by the western media.

This experiment called capitalism failed us miserably and made us forget that the most important things in life are not 'things' but the way we relate to our fellow human beings and in Cuba this concept is alive in every person I encountered.

There is a school or a university on almost every corner of the island. Healthcare is free and for all. Cubans are a mixture of different ethnicities and cultures without any racial discrimination. The almost total absence of crime allows the youth to be out in the streets playing when not in school. The sound of life fills every neighborhood. Because of the lack of Internet and corporate media advertisement people retain a strong cultural heritage, which is based upon personal relationships, kindness and above all sharing.

As I am taking a walk I see a gang of kids sitting on a stoop. I look at them and smile. They immediately smile back and as I look closely I see the image of what progressive thinking and good education produces... These young people embody the concept of "we are all one". Different ethnic groups living under one umbrella without discrimination. They are all Cubans.

Music is strictly connected to their religion and kids are encouraged to study it from a very early age. Their musical skills are incredibly high, and most artists blend the art of storytelling in their creations making them rich, unique and timeless.

Rappers become poets that address problems always seeing "the light at the end of the tunnel" leaving the listener asking questions to

themselves while leaving a good positive message. Musicians follow a school of storytelling in which every note must mean something. Cuba has been able to re awaken my deep love for music and artistry like no other place I ever visited.

When I Think of Los Angeles I see a concrete Jungle with nothing left but selfishness and greed.

Occasionally you see an act of kindness.

Occasionally you feel a smile.

The total lack of a sense of community leaves people estranged from each other with not much to say unless it's work or career related. The sidewalks are empty, the streets full of cars and the cars full of people. The word of the day is, and will always be, "I am busy".

"You are busy killing yourself" I silently think in my own head.

This is the place where the sun shines 300 days a year and planted palm trees are supposed to give you the illusion The American Dream is still alive.

The American Dream is dead.

Soon you end up in hospital - why? How was that period?

- **Can you compare the medical system and hospitals in Havana versus the US?**

After about a week in Havana I started having a headache and a general sense of fatigue. I got on the phone with my friend Trevor Gibson who lives in Birmingham who had had the virus. He told me I was showing some of the same symptoms he had and that I should get checked.

There is a Policlinico (local medical facility) every 10 blocks or so. They are able to monitor every family in every building to prevent the infection from spreading by sending doctors knocking at every door, once a day, to inspect the situation.

As the doctor came in in the morning to check my temperature I told her immediately about the headache and she arranged for me to go to the hospital to get checked and tested for Covid-19, just in case.

A taxi came to pick me up with 2 doctors in charge of the operation and took me to the Naval Hospital just outside of Havana.

My experience there was just amazing.

Most hospitals tend to look bad (especially to Americans) from the outside (and sometimes on the inside too) because the buildings can be up to 100 plus years old, like, for example the ones in my country. It is not a fancy new building that makes a hospital great. It's the work of the Medical personnel that counts.

How can doctors in the USA feel morally up to part knowing the corrupted world of insurance companies they work for?

I am in Cuba.... I am sick.... I go to a hospital and get treated.

Free healthcare is a right for all.

I spent 3 days in isolation with the most incredible and attentive care possible.

The doctors and nurses were just delightful, competent, and experts at making you laugh to always keep the moral up. I felt loved and cared for. The food was delicious...

They did blood work and x-rays to my chest. I got tested for Covid-19 twice. The last test was done one hour before I left the hospital to make sure I didn't catch anything while there.

And it's free. I didn't have to pay a dime.

I spent an hour at the Emergency Room at a Hospital in Los Angeles and I got charged 2900 dollars for some x-rays to my hand, a painkiller and a bag of ice. No comment.

Did you feel all the craziness, fear, and horror from COVID in Cuba? How would you compare it versus the US or Italy...?

For the past 60 years this country has been going through very hard times and dealing with all sort of crisis. Shortage of food is nothing new.

Imagine a siege with no bullets.

With the fall of the U.S.S.R. in 1989 the security blanket that kept Cuba from sinking suddenly disappeared marking the beginning of the "Periodo Especial" that lasted for about 5 years.

During that time the food shortage was so extreme you couldn't see a cat in the streets. It got so bad that there are stories of people melting condoms to replace cheese on homemade pizzas.

So, to answer your question, the people of Havana adapted fast and kept their beautiful smiles of resilience painted on their faces throughout the Pandemic.

Also as I said before you have a doctor coming to your home every day to check on you. You feel safe there.

Remember I escaped from Los Angeles because, as I was getting the real numbers from my parents living in Rome, the general public in the US just seemed to ignore the virus hiding behind conspiracy theories and stocking up on guns, ammunition and toilet paper. The sound of helicopters hovering over your head all day didn't help people stay calm. Like a good old American movie. Irrationality and panic.

Does the world have the true picture of the current situation in Havana and vice versa?

The world has no idea about this little island.

You will not understand this island in a week or two. You need to live here.

When you do, you will discover a side of it that will make you fall in love with life over and over again.

I can only describe it as: **"The feeling of never feeling alone"**.

I thrive on conversing with strangers that challenge your point of view, teach you new things, or look at the same matter from a different angle.

This country is far from perfect, but it somehow functions in a way where its citizens all have free schooling, medical care, and don't discriminate against any shade of skin color. Good education does not promote violence. There is no sense of fear out in the streets due to the lack of crime.

People talk to each other. Everyone is open.

There are more kids playing out in the streets of Havana than fish in the ocean...

This Island knows very little about the outside the world.

They know its "history" better than anybody else because of their education system.

Some travel for work. Very few travel for leisure.

Yet they are some of the most culturally rich people I have ever encountered.

What do your pictures from Havana portray? What are the current problems in the Cuban capital?

My pictures show slices of life.

Show the strength of the Cuban people and their willingness to always be together, share, smile, and dance along to the rhythm of life.

Where there is no music there is no soul.

Cuba is music.

A lot of the recent problems we've had in the Capital come as a direct results of the new tough sanctions imposed by the US from June 12th. I asked my friend Melisa Riviere who is an anthropologist living in Havana to explain to me (and to you) how this new sanctions will affect the citizens of the island.

It is an election year in the United States, and the republicans are performing their anti-Castro procedures to gain Florida votes. They are exploiting the already dire conditions of the embargo exacerbated by the pandemic to try to create revolts in Cuba with the same antiquated operative method of asphyxiating the people in the hope that they will rebel against their government. It is a failed approach already attempted by the Bush and Clinton Administrations in the 1990's "Special Period" after the fall of Cuba's sole trading partner, the Soviet Union. The process did not result in implementing a U.S. philosophy of governance, rather it has only furthered the rift between nations.

In November of 2017, the Trump Administration was the first of twelve U.S. presidential administrations since the inception of the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba to delineate a list of 230 entities that are off limits to the American people. Although the major part of the list refers to hotels, other aspects identify arbitrary products and services we are obligated to refrain from, such as nationwide holding or distribution companies, certain brands of beverages, any goods from specific hardware stores, or the use of particular transportation agencies.

The already-complicated nearly sixty-year-old economic embargo limits Cuba's imports and exports to the United States, as well as the ability to engage economically with third countries who engage with the U.S. Today, under a global pandemic, the Trump Administration's tactics is to increase the entities on the restricted list so that US companies, such as Western Union, who go through a national financial chain called FINCIMEX, can no longer operate in Cuba. Cutting off access to the only remaining avenue from the U.S. of remittances and fiscal transfers in an election year is not

coincidental. It targets Florida exile communities as having a hard hand against Cuba, it limits much needed economic stimulus for small businesses or families on the island in the hopes of creating even more dire conditions, and it justifies keeping a large sum of their own political funding towards “accelerating political change in Cuba” (of which the U.S. State Department designates \$20 million annually) in Florida, where it needs to buy votes.

Politics is a strange game.

We went to the moon and back, discovered the atom and produced nuclear energy, computers, heart transplants and so on... We haven't found a smarter way to make money than rage wars and exploit people. I feel sorry for the stupidity of mankind.

You have a lot of friend all over the world. How do they cope with the pandemic?

My friends tend to be creative people.

Creativity doesn't stop even during a Pandemic.

We shared stories, talked about our creative projects, and gave each other strength to continue to create.

- What are your plans for future?

I am currently working with Adnan Cuhara from Primetime, on a very exciting project.

I will come back to Sarajevo in the fall.

My heart lives in this city.

My Cuban wife Karla will also join me there.

I am also looking to find a gallery and a sponsor for my new photography series and multimedia endeavor “Hidden IN Plain Sight,” shot in Havana during the past 4 months. For This project I teamed up with writers Ricardo Acostarana and Alejandro M. Mustelier as well as legendary Cuban painter Rebastillos, adding words and colors to the experience.

If you want to read the full story of my time in Havana here's the link to “Notes From The Quarantine.” It is a detailed photo journal of my escape

from Los Angeles and the many new things I discovered living in Havana during such difficult times...

https://image4.photobiz.com/8823/20200711065545_315168.pdf

Photography website:

<http://www.alexelenaphotography.com>

Link to the original Interview:

<http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/skrivena-havana-u-vrijeme-embarga-i-virusa>