



Brenda Navarrete's album *Mi Mundo* will debut the opening night of Global Cuba Fest. / Photo by Jim West

Global Cuba Fest 2020 Breaks Political and Musical Barriers

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There was a moment in the not-too-distant past when Americans and Cubans could travel between their respective countries with relative ease. Suddenly, the handful of educational organizations brokering opportunities for so-called meaningful engagement were multiplying by the dozens while airlines and cruise lines increased the number of excursions between the two nations. Just five years ago, it seemed as though the governments of the longtime geopolitical rivals were finally finding common ground after six decades of chilly Cold War relations.

But the late-Obama-era détente lasted only through the first six months of the Trump administration. Soon after the 45th U.S. president took office, government officials began rolling back many of the regulations that eased travel and commercial exchanges between the United States and Cuba. Later the federal government recalled its Havana-based consular officers and sent Cuban dignitaries in Washington back home.

Recent years' events caused a decline – and in some cases outright demise – in outlook among many U.S. businesses and nonprofit organizations

dedicated to fostering relations between America and its Caribbean neighbor. Fortunately for South Florida, the downturn hasn't thwarted the intercultural efforts of local nonprofits Fundarte and the Miami Light Project. Beginning this Saturday, March 7, the cultural affairs groups will present artists from Cuba and its diaspora at the 13th edition of Global Cuba Fest.

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As with the festival's 2019 iteration, Fundarte and the Miami Light Project are partnering with the like-minded Rhythm Foundation to host the gathering's opening night at the balmy North Beach Bandshell.

"This program is focused on presenting, without taboo, artists from the island and the diaspora with the goal of finding a space where the politics of [the Cuban and U.S.] governments don't interfere with the Miami-Dade public's appreciation of great artistic expression," Fundarte founder and Cuban émigré Ever Chavez says.

Beth Boone – the founder and CEO of Miami Light Project – shares Chavez's commitment to presenting Global Cuba Fest in the face of adverse political and social conditions.

"Regardless of the policies of any given administration, Global Cuba Fest remains a constant in Miami as a place to celebrate people and music and community and coming together," Boone says. "I remain fiercely dedicated to this program."



Miami's Sol and the Tribu will perform at the Citadel March 11 as part of Global Cuba Fest. / Courtesy photo

The quality and caliber of the artists scheduled to perform at Global Cuba Fest 2020 are consistent with the high standards set by its previous 12 years. One of this year's biggest headliners is drummer and vocalist **Brenda Navarrete**. The Havana resident has been a sensation since 2010 when she showed off her talents in a 2010 drumming competition in Cuba, where she played the batá, a West African instrument historically performed by men of the Santería faith.

"I remember I got up there onstage, everyone was watching intently, and there was this impactful silence," Navarrete tells *New Times*. Once she began playing, the audience's response turned from ambivalent to overwhelmingly positive. Since then, that joyous sentiment has been a staple of her recordings and live performances.

"The public has always reacted well, and my family and friends always supported me. They'd say, 'Is this your dream? Is this what you want?'" Navarrete recounts. "No taboo was ever going to stop me."

A self-proclaimed dreamer and channeler of positive energy, she loves to say that the good things in her life are, as some spiritual Cubans say, "*Como los dioses*," or "like the gods." This otherworldliness is self-evident in her music, a boundary-free combination of jazz, hip-hop, Cuban pop, and folk music. Although a variety of genres and styles influence her sound, Navarrete admits her music is deeply rooted in Africa.

"There was a time when all I listened to was religious music," she says. "I had this thirst for information about the batá, and I wanted to know what each rhythm was, where it came from, and who the best players were. I would come home and only listen to this music."

Soon enough, she began to hone her chops as a singer. Navarrete's rich vocals – informed by the multivariied styles and rhythms she picked up as a drummer – lace her most recent record, *Mi Mundo*. She'll be performing selections from the new album during this year's Global Cuba Fest.

Just as beats and bass are a prominent feature of Cuban music, so too is the piano, says the fast-fingered **Jorge Luis Pacheco**, one of the fest's featured acts.

"People often forget that the piano is also a percussion instrument, an instrument of percussive strings that can be used for both melodic works and more improvisational, rhythmic ones," Pacheco says via email. His fans sometimes refer to him as a "musical monster" for the way he explores the piano's infinite sonic possibilities.

"I can't help it. Every time I sit down at the piano, I feel as though I'm possessed," he says. "It's incredible that each day I can sit at the piano and discover new harmonies and create new melodies."

As Navarrete's and Pacheco's divergent styles show, Cuba's ability to experiment with and harmoniously fuse its musical expression with all manner of genres and instruments has helped the island nation's music endure. The multiday gathering will also present Guantánamo-born bass player **Yelsy Heredia** and Cuban-American funk artist Sol Ruíz, who'll be joined by her band the Tribu for a show at the Citadel Tuesday, March 11.



Multi-instrumentalist and composer Alain Perez will close out Global Cuba Fest March 14. / Photo by Eduardo Rodríguez.

The festival also wouldn't be complete without a high-energy mambo-turned-timba show led by veteran bass guitarist and composer **Alain Perez**. He'll be accompanied by master trombonist **Julio Montalvo**, who has also shared the stage with the likes of American jazz great Pat Metheny and Oscar D'León, Venezuela's "Lion of the Salsa." Montalvo has recorded five albums with his group the Julio Montalvo Collective and played in the States with the American band Social and Miami practitioner of Cuban funk Leslie Cartaya.

"As a composer and as an arranger of an orchestra, I love and I've played all kinds of instruments," Montalvo says. "Everything that one can fuse and mix, especially in the arts, is more than permissible."

Perez – whom Navarrete credits with helping to launch her career – greatly admires the other musicians on the bill as well as the audiences coming out to see them.

"I'm excited to share my music with Cubans from here and there – all of us who love music and art," Perez says. Thanking Montalvo for the invitation to perform, he adds that the joint performance will see the artists "take a trip through Cuban music," from the mambo of the 1950s to the contemporary music of today.

Even as it has evolved through the years, Cuban music has been defined by its displays of collaboration and inventiveness in the face of limitation. Befitting the art form to which it pays tribute, Global Cuba Fest has done the same in a period marked by rising tensions and deepening societal divides.

However, some believe that the consequences of these conflicts – namely, the music, culture, and passion for life that's emerged from the Cuban diaspora – may be the very thing that'll help stop them. To Pacheco, the performers leading the audience through soundscapes of Global Cuba Fest are not only musicians but also cultural diplomats.

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"I believe we artists are on a mission to unite people and countries through art," he says. "We're ambassadors of art and peace, of union between people. That's the power of the music."

Global Cuba Fest. *With Yelsy Heredia and Brenda Navarrete. 7 p.m. Saturday, March 7, at the North Beach Bandshell, 7275 Collins Ave., Miami Beach; 305-672-5202; northbeachbandshell.com. Tickets cost \$25 via northbeachbandshell.com.*

Sol and the Tribu. *With DJ Edgardo. 8 p.m. Tuesday, March 11, at the Citadel Rooftop, 8300 NE Second Ave., Miami; 305-908-3849; thecitadelmiami.com. Admission is free with RSVP via miamilightproject.com.*

Piano Marathon Cubano, featuring Jorge Luis Pacheco and Mambo #2020 "Mambo Meets Timba" by Alain Perez and c. *8 p.m. Saturday, March 14, at the Miami-Dade County Auditorium, 2901 W. Flagler St., Miami; 305-547-5414; miamidadecountyauditorium.org. Tickets cost \$27 via ticketmaster.com.*