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Making musical memories in Cuba

Posted 9 days ago



Students Tom Grosset and Leon Pycrc learn from Cuban musical legend Bobby Carcases.

Editor's note: Former Daily Herald-Tribune photographer Rick Erlendson recently accompanied more than 150 students from the Grande Prairie Composite high school music program as a parent chaperone. The students were in Cuba for 10 days as part of a musical exchange. We're pleased to present his images and words describing the experience.

This story celebrates what's right with the world, and especially what's right with public education.

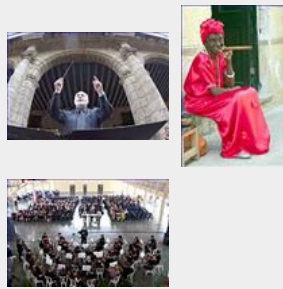
The Grande Prairie Composite high school's entire music program (concert and jazz bands, concert and jazz choirs, and the 50-plus member orchestra) recently returned from a music exchange to Havana, Cuba.

That such a trip would be possible is proof that after almost 40 years of taking students on music trips, Mike Townsend has learned a few things.

Fundraising. Getting parents out to meetings. Motivating students. Working with staff and administrators. Handling visas. Manifests for instruments. A thousand details concerning accommodations, transportation, and a busy itinerary.

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The idea of taking 120 students and 20 teachers and parents to Cuba is just enough challenge to keep life interesting for local music teacher Mr. Townsend – now a year away from retirement.

Organized under the auspices of Canada-Cuba Sports and Cultural Festivals, the trip was a once-in-lifetime experience for local young people to interact with Cuban music students and professional Cuban musicians.

Interestingly, this trip wasn't about traveling internationally. Rather, it was about doing what musicians live for: Making music.

So, yes, the students were able to tour Western Cuba to see rural Cuba, Rosario Mountain, and the Vinales valley complete with an extensive caving experience and a visit to a popular waterfall.

They toured old Havana, established in 1514. And they toured the Morro Fortress, built in 1589 to protect the city from pirates. And sat in the lobby of the hotel Ambos Mundos where Ernest Hemmingway lived for six years while writing his famous novels.

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They enjoyed the popular Santa Maria Beach out front of the Hotel Tropicoco. They experienced sweltering heat, Cuban food, Communist rule, all those crazy cars from the 40s and 50s, and garbage piles on street corners.

But this was not a tourist package. The students were able to encounter Cuban people in their neighborhoods and schools; they were able to meet Cuban high school students through their common interest in music.

So, they played for students in specialty music schools – such as Guillermo Thomas Conservatory in the village of Guanabacoa just north of Havana. And the Cuban students played for them. And they played for students at the Paulita Concepcion Music School, and the Cubans played for them – during which a spontaneous dance erupted with several hundred students.

And so the days unfolded. Performance after performance. School after school.

They participated in a national music festival with Cuban students.

And enjoyed a fine Cuban dinner with hundreds of Cuban students, and then utilized the international language of dance to give form to new friendships – with the hippest Salsa music possible.

The Cuban youth taught our students new rhythms and dance moves, and our students taught Cuban boys how to play football, and then played on the beach whenever time allowed.

Comp students took in a concert at Havana's famed Jazz Café, and before they knew it Cuba's legendary icon jazz composer and musician Bobby Carcases was offering them a chance to perform at the Café with him and with Cuba's popular a cappella group Novel Voz.

And he offered up a workshop about working as an integrated musician.

Then they were invited to join the National Concert Band for a public performance in Arms Square in front of the Palace of the Spanish Captains.

And Mike Townsend found himself guest conducting one of the most talented concert bands in the world.

And why not? Here is a man who has devoted his life to standing on the side of young people.

Here is a teacher who bears such a deep responsibility for his students that he has never avoided the Herculean effort necessary to make such trips possible year after year – in season and out of season.

Here is teacher who lives his discipline. Here is an educator who creates the conditions necessary for youth to not only succeed, but also to find themselves.

And to know they are loved!

And that's probably why the recent trip to Cuba became more magical with each passing day. Issues dissolved.

Personalities mellowed. And 140 people became one tight community of passionate music makers.

When the students sang, they sang heartily. And when they played their instruments, they did so from their souls.

And they cheered for each other like you've never heard cheering before!

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