

# THE MAKING OF RAS CUBA



## Story and photos by Susanne Moss

No one could have been more surprised than me to discover Rastafarians in Cuba. Never having seen anyone carrying locks or wearing the telltale red, gold and green, I assumed that the repressive regime had somehow created a wall that defied diversity's penetration. I was wrong.

## *Santiago de Cuba, parading in Fiesta del Fuego*

I originally came to Cuba to study drumming and found a group that organized drum and dance tours to Havana – “Caribbean Music and Dance Programs.” The first night’s Afro-Cuban folkloric show blew me away and was my first introduction to the amazing cultural and spiritual levity that permeates Cuban culture. I was hooked! After we finished our course, I stayed on to go to Santiago de Cuba, Cuba’s second largest city, where I encountered an even greater sense of spirituality. I met a professor working there as a guide, and he agreed to travel with me to any part of Cuba I wished to go. I realized I wanted to go everywhere to take pictures. It was as beautiful an island as Jamaica, only much larger. I had to see it all. Little did I know what would unfold.

After a few annual visits trucking around the island, I spotted a dreadlocked youth in Havana. He told me that every night along the Malacon, members of the Rasta community gathered to listen to reggae, dance and talk about the culture. I went that very night to find about 15 people. There was a youth sitting with an open



*Cespedes Park, Cuban Rastas*



**Havana, DJ, Malacon nightly gathering**

attaché case on his lap filled with audio tapes. Next to him was a small portable radio blasting loud and somewhat squeaky stains of Bob Marley. A few were dancing. I did notice that somehow, unlike many other places outside of JA, that they moved the same way Jamaicans move to the music. Having seen three year olds dancing at Cuban street parties, I wasn't surprised at how beautifully Cubans move to the music. Many people can dance in time, but only some express with their precise interpretation, what I know as reggae dancing.

My next encounter with Rasta was in Santiago de Cuba. I queried my guide



**Havana, kids dancing at family gathering**

about Rasta and he remembered a high-school friend of his who had been growing that strange (to him) long, knotted hair that he came to know as a kind of Rasta covenant. He arranged for us to meet, and this became the true beginning of my acquaintance with the Cuban Rastas.

This first contact was president of the Bob Marley Association. The Association met regularly to listen to music and interpret the message that Bob brought. Between members, they were able to translate the lyrics into Spanish. To them, Bob was like a God. They really didn't know much about His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I (H.I.M.) except what they had learned in Cuban history classes; that (supposedly) H.I.M. was a cruel dictator who fed the blood of young virgins to his lions. They knew that Cuban militia were sent to Ethiopia to help the Communists overthrow H.I.M.'s regime. In the early 1970s after all, Cuba had close ties to Communist Russia. It wasn't until later in the early 1980s that some youth began tuning into Bob – surprising considering Cuba is a stone's throw from Jamaica! This clearly demonstrates the isolation of Cuba within the larger community of the Caribbean.

What I learned was that Cuban Rastas knew primarily only what Marley's lyrics



**Santiago de Cuba, resting from parade**

had taught them. They had almost no other source of information and certainly no elder Rastafarians to guide them, but they loved Bob's message. They began growing their locks and dressing in whatever African clothing was available. Because the sizable Afro-Cuban community had long been practicing Santeria, Palo and other African-based religions, some African imports were available, but the Rastas started wearing African garb in their every day life as well, not just for ceremonial occasions. Their look – locks and African garb – was quite startling to the Cuban population at large and some people feared them. In addition,



**Santiago de Cuba, street dance party**



**El Cobre, Rasta youth**



**El Cobre, Ras Abigail near family house**

their reputation for smoking marijuana caused people to scorn and ignore, if not abuse them. Knowing the Rastafarians use marijuana as part of their spiritual practice, people avoided contact for fear the authorities would accuse them guilty by association. The penalty for possession in Cuba is extremely severe.

Realizing that availability of Rastafarian literature was almost nonexistent, I committed myself to bring relevant educational information in future visits. Internet is strictly controlled and web access almost nonexistent, except at academic institutions. I brought the 1930 edition of *National Geographic* featuring exceptional coverage on the Coronation of Haile Selassie I, a book of His speeches, the teachings of Marcus Garvey, reggae tapes, t-shirts, African pins, neck bands and other goodies to liven up their presentation as Rastafari men and women. They embraced these gifts and several years meeting with them like this established a strong relationship.

I started to plan my visits to attend the annual Fiesta del Fuego, sponsored by the Cuban Cultural Center in Santiago de Cuba. The festival is huge! Folkloric groups from all the Eastern Provinces (the most African), converge in Santiago for drumming and dancing, day and night. All the neighborhood parks and venues vibrate with spiritual and artistic celebrations. Spectacular parades mark both the opening and finale. At the closing, after passing the judges' stand, the parade winds its way down to Santiago Bay, where a 40-foot tall straw figure representing the devil is set aflame with much dancing and cheering. Many Rastas participate in one way or another. Some are torn between their initiation into Afro-Cuban traditions and their newer discovery of Rastafari. Just as their slave ancestors adapted the Christian practices of their captors into their own African practices, Cuban Rastas have embraced Christian, Afro-Cuban and Rastafarian practices. Everyone has their own way of explaining this merger – different for each individual – the combinations actually becoming a new integrated whole.

Every year the Fiesta del Fuego honors

a different country, based on its cultural or racial relevance to Cuban heritage. In 2002 Fiesta del Fuego honored Panama's contribution to Latin solidarity. That year I presented an exhibition at the prestigious Jacas Gallery in Santiago of images I had taken in Panama. At my opening, a representative from the Cuban Cultural Center invited me to present a show the following year honoring Africa at the Heredia Theater, a modern landmark in Santiago, where famous touring music and dance groups perform.



***Santiago de Cuba, Rasta drummer in parade***

Since the organizers hadn't specified the subject matter of my exhibit, I took the opportunity to present what was important to my personal mission: images of Rastafari elders, cultural scenes, daily lifestyle and reggae artists from outside of Cuba, focusing mostly on Jamaicans. I wanted to chisel a little window into the wall of repression, through which Cuban Rastas could view a sector of the international world of Rastafari. After the show opening, I gave a talk on the major Mansions (groups) of Rastafari. Many Rasta attended. It was the first time some had visited the Heredia Theatre, one so integrally tied to the establishment. The exhibition was a big success. Many questions were asked about Rastafarian culture and it sparked enthusiasm amongst Rasta and non-Rasta alike. At this time,

one of my friends approached and asked if we could make a video about Rastas living in Cuba, for people beyond Cuba's borders to learn of their existence. He also hoped that the international community would visit Cuba bearing information and music. How could I say no?

With only five days left, providence provided I had my video camera with me, or thanks rather to the insistence of Dr. Carole Yawney, a long-term researcher in Rastafarian culture. She wanted me to take pictures of the Rastas viewing my show. I did not have time to do this, but I did have my video camera!

My Cuban friends organized the Rastas and filming locations. My guide agreed to translate. I immediately composed a list of topics. I was guided by issues I knew Rastas in other countries were currently discussing, thinking these might be informative as to the Cuban's conception of Rastafari. With one small camera and no external mic, I shot for four days. Unlike Rastas from many other countries, where I often found individuals guarded and hesitant to be documented, these Rasta were asking me to do so. The participants' sincerity, delight and willingness to share shines through. What a joy and grand opportunity to document this moment in the growth of a young community of Rastafarians. Hurrah!

Once home, the hard work began. I organized the footage and my dear friend, Ona Kiser, offered to edit. Myself and a team translated the selected clips, wrote the subtitles and found a patient technician to apply them to the film. One grungy tape of two excellent Cuban reggae groups was cleaned up by a wonderful sound technician and added to the sound track at select places. One and a half years later, the video was ready for production: cover art, text, burning, printing and packaging.

It saddens me that I haven't been able to bring *Ras Cuba* to Cuba yet. Friends of mine who are experienced anthropologists informed me of the responsibility to protect participants in case they be viewed as anti-government or as dangerous revolutionaries. Therefore I did not include any names. I myself could be mistaken as

a foreign journalist portraying Cuba in a negative light. (Governments and people do sometimes have their differing points of view!) I am just a non-political person whose intention was to make an educational film and spread the word: Rastafari is alive and well in Cuba.

Since conception, *Ras Cuba* has been screened in film festivals in JA, CA, FL, NY and D.C. I believe the future for Cuban Rastafarians is bright. When the travel ban to Cuba is lifted – hopefully sooner rather than later – and Cuba opens web access to its citizens, Rasta from all parts of the world will have open communication with one another – Jah Guide! ☺

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***El Cobre, group gathered for interview***



***Santiago de Cuba, Adriano reasoning in yard***