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Members of "La Vieja Escuela" rock band perform in Havana. — AFP photos



Members of rock band "Challenger" play during a rehearsal in Havana.

CUBA'S AGING ROCKERS FINALLY EARN THEIR DUE

For decades, their songs were banned, and even called the "music of the enemy." But Cuba's rockers have finally found their place in a nation where salsa, rumba and reggaeton usually reign. This year, Havana will celebrate the International Day of Rock and Roll—which falls on Saturday—with three days of concerts. Each day, 13 groups will take the stage at Maxim Rock, the club that

can no longer squeeze into those tight jeans, but they're still performing regular gigs in Havana. Roberto Diaz, a 48-year-old with a graying goatee who will begin a European tour next month with his group Animas Mundi, was one of the musicians who tried to keep rock alive in Cuba in the late 1980s.

"I was one of those youngsters who would get

between the communist-ruled island nation and Washington soon followed—most notably in the form of the US economic embargo in place since the early 1960s. Rock music was banned from television and radio airwaves from the 1960s to the 1980s before slowly benefiting from a decade of increasing tolerance. During the ban, rock "was sometimes viewed as ideological corruption,"

Yellow Submarine

In 1990, the Soviet Union crumbled, Cuba lost its main financial backer—and the island suffered its worst economic crisis. At that time, rock music began to spread its wings. The open-air "Patio de Maria" concert space opened in a hugely symbolic spot: close to Havana's Revolution Square, the country's political hub. There, Cuba's first professional rock groups started performing and change was in the air. Castro himself unveiled a statue of John Lennon in 2000, and El Submarino Amarillo, a rock bar that pays tribute to the eponymous Beatles album and film, "The Yellow Submarine," opened its doors. Several state-run cultural centers began to include rock—once seen as subversive—on their programs.

That was a step in the right direction, "but there's still a lot to do," said Hernandez. "Access to television and radio programs has improved, but we're still only at the beginning." Torres says it's still hard to get interest from music labels. Steinar Seland, a 50-year-old Norwegian who arrived in Cuba in the 1990s, is the leader of Vieja Escuela. When he came to the island, rock "was still a marginal phenomenon, and it remains a bit that way," Seland explains. "But then again, we're on the island of salsa, aren't we?" he added.

Cuban rock diehards say they're ready to make up for lost time. "There are fans who've started to come back," said Torres, explaining the phenomenon of the "tembas" (oldies), who are driven by nostalgia and happiness to be able to listen openly. "They were kids who were hippies or rock enthusiasts and now they're architects, doctors... perfectly integrated into society." Even if the audience is still relatively small, "it makes us happy" to play without fear, said Torres. — AFP



Members of rock band "Challenger" play during a rehearsal in Havana.



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also serves as the home of the government-sanctioned Cuban Rock Agency, for a 10-hour marathon. It will be a far cry from the many years when the classic rocker look—long hair, tight jeans and leather bracelets—was at odds with the "new man" image, hard-working and serious, vaunted by the authorities during Fidel Castro's revolution.

Despite the obvious difficulties, most of Cuba's rockers chose to remain at home and dedicate themselves to their music, rather than opt for exile or the struggles of dissident life. Nowadays, some have lost their hair while others

stopped in the street all the time, getting asked for my ID documents or being taken down to the police station if I was walking around with my guitar or keyboard," said Diaz. "It was tough—it wasn't like it is today," said Virgilio Torres, a 62-year-old singer with Vieja Escuela ("Old School").

'Ideological corruption'

Rock came to Cuba from the United States in 1955, four years before the revolution. Political confrontation

said Torres. "It was the enemy's music because we sang in English, which created confusion.

"Later, (authorities) realized it wasn't many years later but they'd already deprived many musicians of their instruments, leaving them with nothing." The island's rockers needed to come up with ingenious ways to keep playing. "We made guitar strings with telephone wires, used telephone handsets to fashion adapted microphones, we created speakers from wood," said Aramis Hernandez, 62, a drummer and leader of the band Challenger.



Movie producer Harvey Weinstein (center) exits after his appearance in criminal court on sexual assault charges on July 11, 2019 in New York City. — AFP

Judge approves fresh changes to Weinstein defense team, trial due in September

A New York judge approved fresh changes to the defense team of Harvey Weinstein on Thursday, less than two months before the former Hollywood producer's trial on sexual assault charges is set to begin on September 9. Asked by Judge James Burke if he agreed to allowing Chicago-based Donna Rotunno, a former prosecutor who specializes in defending men accused of sexual assault, and Damon Cheronis to replace his current attorney Jose Baez, Weinstein, dressed in a suit and tie, said "Yes." Weinstein faces charges involving two different women—one who alleges he raped her in 2013, the other that he forced her to perform oral sex in 2006.

Having originally retained leading New York attorney Benjamin Brafman, who battled unsuccessfully to get the case dismissed, Weinstein then switched out his team earlier this year and brought in Baez and also Ronald Sullivan, a Harvard law professor, who withdrew in May after protests on campus. According to US media reports, the founder of the Miramax studios and The Weinstein Company has reviewed his defense strategy several times, and thought that having a woman heading his team would make a more favorable impression on the jury in a sexual assault case.

"I think this type of a case requires the right lawyers," Rotunno said after the court session. "I think a woman standing here could make a difference. I think I may view things a little bit differently." She said the #MeToo movement, which erupted in protest against sexual harassment as dozens of women came forward to denounce Weinstein, was partly to blame for her client's plight. "Movements allow emotions to take over and they're devoid of facts and evidence," she said. "Emotion in this case has taken over."

"We are hoping that as the trial progresses, as evidence is put forth and witnesses are heard, we will hear the other side of this story," the attorney said. "The story that has been told up to this point has been very one-sided. And I can promise you that there is a truth you have not reported on." Lawyers representing the women accusing Weinstein pointed out that disgraced entertainer Bill Cosby had also hired a high-powered woman lawyer to plead his case, but he ended up in jail. Once one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, Weinstein has been accused of harassment and assault by more than 80 women, including stars such as Angelina Jolie and Ashley Judd. — AFP

R. Kelly arrested on child pornography, other charges

R&B superstar R. Kelly has been arrested on suspicion of having sex with five underage girls, recording some of it on video tapes, and then attempting to hide the evidence, US prosecutors said Friday. A 13-count indictment returned Thursday in Chicago also alleged the 52-year-old singer intimidated victims and concealed evidence in a 2008 trial that ended in his acquittal of child pornography charges. The latest charges include receiving and producing child pornography, enticing a minor to engage in criminal sexual activity and obstruction of justice.

A separate federal indictment unsealed in New York Thursday accused Kelly of recruiting women and girls for sex. Federal agents arrested the Grammy Award winner Thursday night while he walked his dog in Chicago, his lawyer Steve Greenberg said in a statement. Two former employees of his music business—Derrel McDavid and Milton Brown—also were charged in the case. The Chicago indictment alleges Kelly met the five victims in the 1990s and had sex with them when they were under age 18, "creating numerous explicit videos with four of them," federal prosecutors said in a statement.

Payments for videos

According to the indictment, Kelly and McDavid began paying an acquaintance hundreds of thousands of dollars in 2001 to collect the videos in an effort to hide evidence. When the unidentified acquaintance planned to go public with the videos, the indictment alleges, Kelly, McDavid and others paid him \$170,000 to cancel the event. Kelly, whose legal name is Robert

Kelly, was already facing Illinois state felony charges of aggravated sexual assault, and was out on bail at the time of his arrest.

"The conduct alleged appears to largely be the same as the conduct previously alleged against Mr Kelly in his current state indictment and the former state charges that he was acquitted of," Kelly's lawyer Greenberg said. "Most, if not all, of the conduct alleged is decades old," he added. Kelly has a decades-long history of abuse allegations, especially of underage girls. In 1994 he wed his protegee Aaliyah, the late R&B star who was 15 at the time.

Kelly, then 27, had produced the teenage singer's debut album titled "Age Ain't Nothing But a Number." Their marriage was later annulled, and Aaliyah died in a plane crash in 2001. Despite unsettling claims against him, the decorated musician—known for hits including "I Believe I Can Fly"—has continued to perform and maintain a solid fan base.

'Surviving R Kelly'

But his fortunes began to shift after the January release of a six-part documentary called "Surviving R. Kelly." The documentary, which alleged that Kelly engaged in sexual, mental and physical abuse of girls and women, prompted Chicago prosecutors to publicly seek out potential victims. After the state charges were filed in February, Kelly spent three nights behind bars and was released after coming up with \$100,000, a tenth of the \$1 million bail set in court. — AFP



In this file photo Singer R. Kelly leaves the Leighton Criminal Court Building after a hearing on sexual abuse charges in Chicago. — AFP



French jazz accordionist Vincent Peirani recently did a tour that included a stop in New York, where he participated in the France Rocks festival. — AFP

Despite financial hurdles, New York still seducing jazz artists

Its lilts and grooves can feel like nostalgic rhythms from a bygone era, but jazz remains a thriving contemporary art form—and its proponents still flock to New York hoping to catch a break. Despite a booming rents that have left few affordable bases for struggling artists of all stripes, jazz musicians tend to consider the American cultural metropolis the premier petri dish for cultivating their craft. "There's a long history," said Clovis Nicolas, a bassist who grew up near Marseille and has called New York home for 16 years. After a few visits in his late 20s he decided to move there from Paris.

"I was getting so much information and inspiration from the music scene that it would make me play better," he recalled. "The standards are pretty high. It's a place where all the best musicians from the US and the world come to meet," the 46-year-old told AFP at a diner a few neighborhoods south of his home in Harlem. Jazz pianist Jean-Michel Pilc, like Nicolas, took part in the recent France Rocks concert series highlighting the strong presence of French musicians stateside.

The sheer number of hopefuls vying to be the next Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie or Billie Holiday have helped maintain the city's status as a jazz capital, he says. "There is a mythology to New York," he said, adding that shortly after he arrived in 1994 "all of the French musicians were coming here... it became a little bit of a gimmick."

'Something sweet'

Pilc lived in New York nearly two decades, becoming an American citizen before moving to Montreal in 2015 to teach his craft at McGill University. "I think musicians need energy, and there is a particular type of energy in this place," Pilc, who recently played at New York's historic Blue Note club in Greenwich Village, said of his old stomping ground. "You step in a club in New York and you'll hear people playing bass and drums in such a way—there is something sweet, idiomatic about it, that sometimes is more difficult to find in Europe," he said. — AFP