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Exiles Protest Appearance of Cuban Band Los Van Van in Miami

by LADB Staff

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A scheduled concert in Miami by Cuba's most popular dance band, Los Van Van, had to be rescheduled as anti-Castro exile leaders protested its use of a city-owned auditorium. The protest and subsequent success of the concert suggested a growing generational split on the issues of anti-Castroism a split revealed in a recent poll. The group was first booked into the James L. Knight Center for Oct. 9.

Anti-Castro organizations such as the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), local radio talk-show hosts, and local officials demanded cancellation of the concert. Miami Mayor Joe Carollo called Los Van Van "the official communist band of Fidel Castro." City Commissioner Tomas Regalado said, "I don't like it because I think it's a political challenge. They'll go back to Cuba and say, 'We played in the theater owned by the city.'"

Directors of the James L. Knight Center, under heavy pressure to deny Van Van promoter Debbie Ohanian use of the facility, demanded proof the band was in the US legally and that it was receiving only the restricted payments permitted under US law. Unable to provide the documents in time, Ohanian had to cancel.

Los Van Van had State Department and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) approval for a 26-city tour of the US. With legal assistance from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Ohanian threatened to sue the city for denial of First Amendment rights. Negotiations between Ohanian and the center for a new concert date failed when Ohanian refused the center's insistence that she secure special insurance.

Instead, the band moved its concert to the Miami Arena, Oct. 9. Regalado promised to encourage protests outside the arena, and radio commentator Juan Amador Rodriguez suggested videotaping people as they entered the arena to identify the "Fidel sympathizers." "We should film everyone who enters the concert, so that later we can show the images publicly," he said.

Miguel Saavedra, president of the exile organization Vigilia Mambisa, said his group would film those attending but would not publish the pictures. The videos would be kept until the collapse of the Castro government so the successor government could identify concertgoers who were Castro sympathizers, he said.

An estimated 4,000 protestors shouted "communists," "prostitutes," and other epithets as some 2,000 concertgoers entered and left the arena. Riot police arrested 11 protestors and several people were reported injured. Poll shows intergenerational clash of opinion In a Miami Herald poll, 48% of all respondents said they opposed holding the concert at a city-owned facility.

Among respondents over age 50, however, the majority opposed was 58%. Among Hispanics, 65% opposed the concert, but only 50% of Hispanics under 50 opposed. Rob Schroth, who conducted the Herald poll, said it shows a fault line between generations. "Ten years ago, we might have expected 60% or more of those polled to support prohibition, while today that number is below 50%," he said.

While other Cuban dance bands have played in Miami, Los Van Van is the only one to create a crisis. Many Miami Cubans who opposed the concert said they objected because they thought that the band would earn dollars that would go to Castro and that Los Van Van was an official communist band. The band's perceived association with the government is partly because of its name (The Go Go's), which it took from a government slogan used during the 1969 drive for 10-million metric-ton sugar harvest.

The band's founder, Juan Formell, says the group is apolitical and its songs reflect daily life in Cuba, not politics. Some Van Van songs border on anti-government critiques by dwelling on economic hardships of the current "special period." A Miami Herald analysis of the band's 30-year popularity in Cuba suggests that much of the Miami opposition is to the band's musical style, which evolved under socialism since 1959, and is "not only incomprehensible, but intolerable to many in the first generations who fled."

Ohanian, the agent for the Buena Vista Social Club, a band of elderly Cuban musicians made famous by a recent film, said she had canceled a Feb. 11 concert at the Jackie Gleason Theater in Miami Beach because of fear for the musicians' safety. Los Van Van plan a return engagement in Miami in December, but Dade County Mayor Alex Penelas has asked the State Department to deny them visas because their appearance could cause more protests. [Sources: Sun-Sentinel (Florida), 09/16/99; El Nuevo Herald, 09/28/99; Inter Press Service, 10/06/99; The Miami Herald, 09/13/99, 09/28/99, 10/06/99; Reuters, 10/10/99; Miami New Times, 10/07-13/99; Associated Press, 09/16/99, 10/21/99]

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