

Tom Morello, Los Van Van, Ozomatli & 60 More to Perform at Concert for Cuba

By: Judy Cantor-Navas
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The two-day event to honor Cuban doctors will stream July 18-19.

Cuban artists including Los Van Van and Alexander Abreu, plus Tom Morello, Michael McDonald and Ozomatli are among 60 acts that will join together for a free two-night concert to honor Cuba's doctors.

The Concert for Cuba is a two-night, six-hour streaming festival set for this weekend (July 18-19). It will rally to garner a Nobel Prize for the international efforts of Cuban medical professionals during the pandemic and advocate for the end of the U.S. embargo while showcasing performances by Cuban artists and international acts who will lend their support for the event's messages.

Other artists -- including Orquesta Aragon, Mezcla, Síntesis, Dayramir Gonzalez, Omara Portuondo and Orquesta Failde -- will perform from the Cuban Music Institute and other locations in Havana. Morello, McDonald, Ozomatli, Dionne Warwick, Arturo O'Farrill and others will

appear via video from different locations. All are performing pro bono. See more information about where to stream the event below.

The event will also include appearances by Danny Glover, Michael Moore and several U.S. politicians, as well as Cuban doctors and U.S. doctors who studied in Cuba.

The Concert for Cuba is “something positive in a moment when there’s so much sadness. Accentuating the work of the Cuban medical teams seems like something most people can rally around and support,” says Marguerite Horberg, the founder and director of Chicago Cultural Center HotHouse.

Horberg is producing the concert together with San Francisco attorney and presenter Bill Martinez and Cuban music promoter and manager Raul Cuza.

The pandemic has illustrated that disease and suffering have no borders,” says Horberg, who has been presenting concerts by Cuban artists since 1986. “Having culture as a very strong healing force for both repairing diplomatic ruptures and sharing of medical advances is something that we think is very important.”

Cuba’s Henry Reeve International Medical Brigade has been working in 22 countries to fight COVID-19. A petition, whose supporters include Glover and Morello, has been circulating to encourage the Nobel committee to award the healthcare workers the 2021 Nobel Prize for Peace.

The idea for the Concert for Cuba began with a conversation between Horberg and Cuza about streaming concert by El Septeto Santiaguero, one of the bands that he manages, for the HotHouse channel. They soon launched the idea for the online festival.

“We’ve put together an outstanding program and our message is one of peace, human sovereignty, the rejection of walls in favor of bridges and the coming together of cultures and people,” says Cuza, founder of the Cuza Agency.

Cuza has been working with The Cuban Ministry of Culture and The Cuban Music Institute in Havana, which is the setting for most of the participating Cuban artists’ performances. Both have produced myriad shows since the pandemic shut Cuba down last April.

“Cuban artists have the same goals as all international artists do right now: to maintain their audiences and keep their careers going in an uncertain situation in which we don’t know when we can start to tour again,” Cuza adds.

Performances for The Concert for Cuba will be pre-recorded, to avoid the possibility of the livestream being blocked by the U.S. government. Most of the international artists participating have an established relationship with Cuba.

Morello (who will be seen playing his anti-police brutality song “Rabbit’s Revenge” on Saturday) performed with Audioslave in Havana in 2005 for an audience of 70,000 people. Canadian saxophonist Jane Bunnett has frequently recorded with Cuban artists. The Congolese salsa singer Ricardo Lemvo (a long-time Los Angeles resident) grew up listening to Congolese rumba and Cuban big bands. McDonald, best known as the singer of some of the Doobie Brothers’ biggest hits, has never been to Cuba, but says his longstanding interest in the country and its culture drew him to the event.

“So many Americans share the bewilderment that this embargo continues all these years after whatever the reasons it was initially put in place for have long past,” McDonald tells Billboard. “I feel very privileged to be a part of this.”

Organizer Bill Martinez, who has been working with Cuban and other international artists to obtain visas to tour in the U.S. for decades, has downsized his operations in the wake of mass tour cancellations because of the pandemic.

The Trump administration’s reversal of President Obama’s historic changes in U.S. Cuba policy had already discouraged cultural exchange with Cuba. But the Concert for Cuba is offering another way for Cuban musicians to play for the world. He notes that the response by artists in and outside of Cuba wanting to participate has been so great that they may have to organize a second festival with a different line up.

“We are hoping we can return to better days when we had better relations with Cuba,” Martinez says. “And if we have to keep repeating the same message, we will.”

