

Afro-Cuban Jazz and Helping Hands: Cuba's Accessible Beat

04/24/2025

Contents

Proem	1
Podcast intro	1
Blending Language and Culture	2
Havana Music School.....	2
Havana Music School – Morningside Studios Connection	3
Managing the Business.....	3
Managing the Stay.....	4
Employer of Musicians	5
Call to action	6
Dreams	6
Traveling with Disabilities.....	6
Why Cuba?	7
More Music	8
Reflection	8
Podcast Outro.....	8

Proem

Music is a world within itself, with a language we all understand. — Stevie Wonder.

My nighttime voices bombarded me. How can you go to Cuba as a musician? You're not good enough. Your wheelchair won't make it over their crumbling roads and sidewalks. Your horn is too big and heavy with everything else. You can't do too many stairs. You don't speak Spanish. You won't be safe. I hate those deflating voices.

I should be excited about this chance of a lifetime. I completely trust Dan Fox, our guide and arranger. My disabilities do not define me. Helpful people are everywhere. I'm going with my partner of fifty years. We love music and culture. Who cares about politics?

What the heck? We went. Welcome to the story of our adventures.

Podcast intro

Welcome to Health Hats, the Podcast. I'm Danny van Leeuwen, a two-legged cisgender old white man of privilege who knows a little bit about a lot of healthcare and a lot about very little. We will listen and learn about what it takes to adjust to life's realities in the awesome circus of healthcare. Let's make some sense of all of this.



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04/24/2025

Blending Language and Culture

Music alone can abolish differences of language or culture between two people and invoke something indestructible within them. — Irene Nemirovsky.

Eleven of us from New England and Houston traveled to Cuba for a week in January for a music-cultural event—a Band Camp organized by Dan Fox and Arlington, MA's [Morningside Studios](#). Our group ranged from no Spanish (me) to fairly fluent (Sonya and Dan). Our host, [the Havana Music School](#), was also fluent in English along this same continuum. Consequently, we communicated in three languages: Spanish, English, and Music. Few people were fluent in all three. My teacher, Pachy, and I managed well with some help from translation, pantomimes, and trial and error. We enjoyed exchanging knowledge, with me teaching him about 'herding cats' and 'God willing and the creek don't rise.' However, we had difficulty when he spoke about 'black notes.' I thought all notes were black, and he meant that quarter notes were the black ones.

The Morningside Music Studios group traveled to Cuba for a week of music. Hosted by the Havana Music School, we enjoyed two hours of individual lessons daily, followed by two hours of rehearsals with students and teachers in two ensembles working on five tunes. We did some sightseeing in the afternoons and attended one venue of the Havana Jazz Festival each night. The week culminated in the ensembles' performances at a local restaurant. Since the Havana Jazz Festival had concluded, many local musicians attended our performance, cheering us on and joining in to sing.

This episode is an unpolished mix of photos, videos, and social media posts about our music, sightseeing, Airbnb, and the Havana Jazz Festival. I suggest watching the YouTube video for the best experience.

We'll begin with an Instagram post about our luxurious accommodations in Havana, close to the Music School. The music background is Mambo Inn by Mario Bouza. Link in the show notes.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DGY2KtJRCNZ/>

We'll follow that with the ensemble's performance of *Sofrito* by Mongo Santamaria, then a conversation with Claudia Fumero and my wife, Ann Boland. <https://youtu.be/yCXa7IGtBlw>

Havana Music School

Claudia Fumero and her husband, Miguel, own and operate the Havana Music School. We recorded the audio of our conversation about the school. My wife, Ann Boland, assisted with some translation. This episode's video includes photos and clips of our fellow students and teachers, along with a tour of the old city. <https://health-hats.com/pod232>.

Health Hats: So Claudia and Ann, thank you for being here with us. Claudia, introduce yourself and tell us where we are.

Claudia Fumero: My name is Claudia Fumero. I come from Cuba, and I have a music school—the music school shares Cuban music and Cuban culture for foreigners.



<https://www.health-hats.com/pod233>

Afro-Cuban Jazz and Helping Hands: Cuba's Accessible Beat

04/24/2025

Ann Boland: Sharing the culture that was part of music for foreigners. Plus, she probably figured Americans would listen to this, which would be good for their school.

Health Hats: Okay. So is the school for foreigners only?

Claudia Fumero: Yeah. Now at this moment, it's for foreigners.

Health Hats: Yes. And foreigners who are not Cuban can be anywhere.

Claudia Fumero: Yes. Yeah.

Havana Music School – Morningside Studios Connection

Health Hats: So we're here with a group with Dan Fox that has had a relationship with you guys for some time. And how long has that been?

Claudia Fumero: I think it's mostly four or five years now. Yeah. Yeah. Because yeah, he wrote us our, because we are the website. Then he writes us.

Health Hats: Oh, the school is HavanaMusicSchool.com. Yes. Okay. So anybody can see it? Yes. I understand you have an Instagram page, too.

Claudia Fumero: Yes. The same, @HavanaMusicSchool.

Health Hats: We'll have to check that out. Yeah.

Managing the Business

What's your role? What's your job?

Claudia Fumero: Now, in this moment? I'm the manager. Yeah. Okay. And I'm teaching salsas, too. Now I respond to every email, uh, yeah. I call, uh, the teacher. Yeah, yeah. Arrange the lessons. Yeah. Okay. For the student. Sometimes, they came for two hours, one hour, or for more time. Maybe one week, one month. It depends on the students, but now I think the people came more for a short time. Maybe two hours, one hour. Yeah. It's the now in this time.

Ann Boland: Yeah. Just trying to try it out. Maybe just,



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Afro-Cuban Jazz and Helping Hands: Cuba's Accessible Beat

04/24/2025

Claudia Fumero: I don't know, maybe the travel is changing. The world is changing. People don't have a lot of money and spend a lot of money. I don't know, maybe it's a big...

Health Hats: It's a big deal being a businessperson. The business is you and your husband. And so, um, how did you decide you wanted to do something like this?

Claudia Fumero: Yeah. First, uh, the idea for the school was my husband, Miguel, yeah. He went to, we met, and he wanted to stay in Cuba, and he thought, I need to do something to stay in Cuba with you and create the school. In the beginning, the teacher, the student going to

Ann Boland: Oh, they went to the teacher's house.

Claudia Fumero: The teacher's house. The first and after, we create the space with the instrument for the teacher and the students.

Health Hats: The germ of the idea, the beginning, was being the connector. Yeah. Between students and teachers.

Claudia Fumero: Exactly. Connect

Health Hats: the student with the teachers. Okay. And at first, they went to people's homes. Yes. Teachers' homes. Yes. And then I can see that, especially if the group gets large. Mm-hmm. Or your, yeah. It's much nicer to have a place.

Claudia Fumero: Exactly. So

Health Hats: Then, was this the first place?

Claudia Fumero: We start in another area of Havana but in a small house with two rooms. But it was very nice because, at the beginning, Obama came to Cuba, the country was opening, and many people came. Cuba was interesting in the experience, uh, for. Was amazing.

Managing the Stay

Health Hats: Okay. And then it got big, and it felt like you were successful. Yeah. And the price of success.



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Afro-Cuban Jazz and Helping Hands: Cuba's Accessible Beat

04/24/2025

Yeah. I did. Being of a bigger play, I think, I know for me, I play bari sax, and I was like, oh, I'm bringing my chair and all my equipment. Anyway, you guys found one for me to rent. Mm-hmm. Yeah. And so, is that a usual thing when you find instruments? Yeah. For people who are traveling to play while they're here?

Claudia Fumero: The same instrument is difficult to find in Cuba or buy because we have the percussion, conga, maraca, and claves. However, some specific instruments are difficult to find or buy in Cuba. We don't have many courses on sax because we don't have a sax, for example. The people came here mainly for the percussion and guitar. We have that, but we don't have, or maybe sax, violin, or cello only. We have the big one, contra, double bass, and piano.

Health Hats: Okay. And so do you also. Do you help with people's arrangements for the rest of their lives while they're here?

Claudia Fumero: Sometimes, we arrange the apartment for the stay, Airbnb, or something like that. But it's common. Sometimes, people arrange their own lives.

Health Hats: Is business good?

Claudia Fumero: Yeah, it's good, but we have the country's tourist site seasons. For example, the Cuban winter is the high point for tourists this season.

Employer of Musicians

Health Hats: Also, you're an employer for musicians.

Claudia Fumero: Yeah. I think it. Um, the musicians have a very high level in the associated. They have a lot of work. If you are, if the musician is good, it's the

Health Hats: the middle group, the,

Claudia Fumero: It's very nice.

Health Hats: People who are professional but not stars.

Claudia Fumero: They can play out in a lot of places.



<https://www.health-hats.com/pod233>

Afro-Cuban Jazz and Helping Hands: Cuba's Accessible Beat

04/24/2025

Claudia Fumero: Yes, yes. Yeah. For example, maybe in the United States, a big country, you are a musician, but in Cuba, you are a musician. It's huge? I am a musician.

Health Hats: Oh. How has this process of having this school affected you as a musician and an actor?

Claudia Fumero: Yeah. I love the Cuban music. Okay. I love my culture. I love the Cuban music. Um, Miguel is a musician, it's not for professional musicians, but he likes studying music. And for us, it's not difficult. Yeah. Because we always hear music. In the musical, we are surrounded by music.

Claudia Fumero: Yeah. I don't need to play the instrument to contract with other teachers.

Call to action

I now have one URL for all things Health Hats. <https://linktr.ee/healthhats>. You can subscribe for free or with a contribution through Patreon. You can access show notes, search the 600 plus episode archive, and link to my social media channels. Your engagement by listening, sharing, liking, and commenting makes quite an impact. Thank you.

Dreams

Health Hats: If you were king for a day, you could do something with the program. No barriers, no money worries, no government worries, no social worries. What would you do differently with the school?

Claudia Fumero: I think I may contract teachers and buy more instruments. Yeah. We could do ensembles for a lot of people.

Health Hats: And maybe like a small theater.

Claudia Fumero: I dream of a small coffee shop where you can come to play music.

Health Hats: Okay, good. I love it. Okay, so is there anything you want to ask us?

Traveling with Disabilities

Claudia Fumero: Uh, yeah. Um, how, how do you travel and do the music? Just that we are talking about You are my wheelchair. Yeah. And regarding the music, how do you ensemble it with the sax? Yeah. It's amazing how well,



<https://www.health-hats.com/pod233>

Afro-Cuban Jazz and Helping Hands: Cuba's Accessible Beat

04/24/2025

Health Hats: One is I really wanna do it. So that's motivating. And then, I have two people that help me figure out how to do it. And my wife, we think a lot about, okay, where am I at? How, what, and how do I manage this? Then, I studied with a man, Jeff Harrington, who is at Berklee. And I've been studying with him for 16 years, I think.

And so he knows me. He knows that my abilities change physically, and he's very sensitive to that, and I just can't do it. But I love the bari, and everywhere I've been, people are so helpful, and it didn't take me long to get over the fact that I needed help from people. If you're a nice guy, show up, and do the work, people will always help you.

Why Cuba?

Claudia Fumero: Why did you decide to come to Cuba with Danny?

Ann Boland: Why did I decide to come to Cuba? I like to hike. And we have friends that we hike with. And so Danny comes along on our hiking trips. And so I thought, oh, and then we try to work it out so he can also participate in things. But I thought, okay, here's an opportunity for Danny to do something he likes. Yes. And so I will come along with him.

Health Hats: We share interests. I think it's also. I wasn't interested in hiking the Grand Canyon. You know, the Grand Canyon?

Claudia Fumero: Yeah.

Health Hats: There's no way I couldn't sit on a donkey, but Ann loved this music once they were thinking about something I could do. So music, that's one of our bonds. Is music. It has always been, and we've always enjoyed good music. It wasn't her thing.

Ann Boland: I like music a lot. I've enjoyed all the concerts and meeting people from different cultures. So, it wasn't his interest. I knew I would enjoy it.

Claudia Fumero: Yeah. And Cuba, you are thinking about Cuba with the, because you travel a lot.

Health Hats: Yeah.

Claudia Fumero: And Cuba. If you were thinking of traveling to Cuba or the opportunity is, and you,



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Afro-Cuban Jazz and Helping Hands: Cuba's Accessible Beat

04/24/2025

Health Hats: I heard from people who've traveled to Cuba, and there were a couple of people who came here 10 years ago with Dan that I played with, and so they, and we've been interested in Cuba just 'cause the national relationships are so bizarre.

Now I'm talking for me. There's a difference between how governments and people get along. And especially when there's something culturally and common like music, and everywhere we've ever been. There are jerks everywhere. Mostly, people are just lovely. And here people have been so helpful. Even just at that, the concert last night, when it was full, said, put out a seat for me. Yes. Ann came along. She was gonna sit by the wall, and the guy just stood up and sat here, and people have been. So accommodating and sensitive. And I love that. I like people, and I like different people.

More Music

Next, another Instagram post about our percussion workshop near the beach.. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DGgq--qsthP/> Then a tune from our gig, *Afro Blue*, composed by Mongo Santamaría, the renowned Cuban percussionist. He [first recorded the piece in 1959](#) while playing with the Cal Tjader Sextet, and it quickly became a jazz standard notable for its use of African cross-rhythms. Links in the show notes

Reflection

"Music is closely intertwined with the life of every race. We understand the people better if we know their music, and we appreciate the music better if we understand the people themselves." — Frances Densmore.

My gradual awareness of Cuba began when I was ten years old during the Cuban Missile Crisis, involving JFK, Castro, and Khrushchev. In my teenage years, as I became politicized by the War in Vietnam, I learned about the US-supported Cuban dictator Batista and the revolutionary Che Guevara. In my fifties, I started listening to Ry Cooder and the Buena Vista Social Club, an Afro-Cuban band.

I need to interject here to express my appreciation for all the thoughtful assistance I received. In particular, Lazaro, our van driver, figured out my capabilities during the first drive: How to fold and unfold the chair, how to best assist me in and out of the van, and what to alert me to watch for in whatever place we left the van to eat, sightsee, or play. Pachy, Gisselle, Claudia, teachers, and fellow students acted as my roadies, scouts, and safety checkers. Estoy agradecido.

I hope you feel the energy created.

Podcast Outro

I host, write, and produce Health Hats the Podcast with assistance from Kayla Nelson and Leon and Oscar van Leeuwen. Music from Joey van Leeuwen. I play Bari Sax on some episodes alone or with the Lechuga Fresca Latin Band. I'm grateful to you who have the critical roles as listeners, readers, and watchers. Subscribe and contribute. If you like it, share it. See you around the block.



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