

The Importance of Documentary Photography in Cuban Rap

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To be able to talk about the relationship between Cuban rap, photography and me, I have to start by thanking this musical genre for opening the door for me to some of the work of an important group that presents a version of Cuba's alternative reality—Cuba's underground, counterculture. Cuban hip-hop is performance, protest, the rescuing of traditions and also a door into the future of musical culture.

Como el arrullo de palma en la espesura [Like the Murmur of Palms in the Thicket], the rumor of the First Cuban Rap Festival can still be heard. Its survival in the collective memory, in that of some specialists, of the entire audience that attended the Alamar Amphitheater, and of the event's protagonists (DJs, MCs, singers, rappers), is still suffering from the very same ill effects that allowed it to be rejected and censored by those who did not want a voiceless generation of blacks and *mestizos* to have access to a space in which they could shout out, speak, and seek integration. Consciously or unconsciously, this generation has become the target of the anti-imperialist court proceedings that the State organized without know-

ing the depth and truth of what Cuban rap signified and still means.

There is no archival evidence of the First Cuban Rap Festival, at least no documentary evidence of the sort that those interested in the good or evil of the most recent alternative Cuban, musical culture to which those interested in this might have simple or direct access. Cuban rap has no public recording or film libraries, but many informal archives do exist, and so do their corresponding myths, one, perhaps the best known one that has been spread over and over again by word of mouth is: "no one shows the photos taken at the Rap Festival because they are worth millions."

No one knows exactly when this myth began to spread together with the *cum cum pá* of the earliest, primitive backgrounds that were used as accompaniment for singing, but that myth is a lie, and many of those historical images have been lost forever, or are hidden and waiting for their fifteen minutes of fame.

It might be that those historical photos may be worth millions some day, but how can we who are interested in gaining access to the Grupo Uno archive (the Festival's official organizer) get it? How can we simply consult the



Alina Guzmán at work

photographs by Diamela Fernández or Jorge Carlos Acebedo (two of the photographers who were at the event when it took place)? Is there a sound archive? Is there something that can prove to us that there was a Rap Festival, something other than our memories and good intentions?

At this moment, neither the defunct festival nor Cuban rap have an official web page, which makes the problem of access to historical information even worse. We know there are thousands of photos and hundreds of short videos that were taken with semi-professional cameras; we have searched through some of them, as we have through so much of the disconnected information that there is on rap in Cuba that silently circulates through our computers and greatest network. We have started to construct a modest personal archive about this cultural event. Read carefully—a modest archive. Nothing more. So why this article? The main reason is the questions that many friends ask me constantly.

Why do I engage in documentary photography at Cuba rap events? Why do I feel that someone should sacrifice his or her time and modest knowledge in order to leave historical evidence of the contemporary moment in Cuba rap? Where does that feeling in me come from?

I am always asked these types of questions. Ignoring the bad intentions of some, I reflect and meditate on my answers. I think about that Festival and the non-existing archives. I think the answers could be complicated, but the simple yet shocking one I offer with sincerity to explain why I turn the shots over and don't charge for them:

"I know of no other photographer in this city with an interest in saving the documentary value of these events concerning the kind of alternative culture we have in this part of the island. I have participated in multiple events over that last six years and have always felt a secret and unhealthy interest in using those photos to promote a value not

often seen in the history of Cuban art. It is not that I lack a sense of the commercial value of photos as an art object, but rather that I know if I don't do it, no one will. Thus, that moment of collective history will remain unknown, negotiated privately, be forgotten in an archive of rare recordings on some computer just waiting for its moment, or become a lost format. A moment, an instant can mean a whole lifetime."

Here is a simple example: during the last and already mythical Rotilla Festival (2010), which took place on the beach at Jibacoa, I had the good fortune to be in the first row of photographers and cameramen while Raudel Escuadrón Patriótica shared the stage with Maikel El Xtremo.

That was an historic moment for Cuban rap—Maikel El Xtremo's energetic entrance, as he gives Raudel the Cuban flag; the impact of his overwhelming flow; Maikel and his charisma and professionalism. He is comfortable in all social spaces. With the radiant light of his voice, he is always "on," provoking and convoking us to rescue our personal freedom, our civil and most basic rights. They are two of Cuban rap's vanguard at this time in Cuba. They are tireless. Their styles and gestures are very different. Then there are the thousands of uplifted fists of inspired young people, a whole generation of youth. It was essential to capture this unique and unrepeatable moment, to see the tears streaming down Raudel's cheeks. He is an Afro-descendant with dreadlocks, and displays a spiritual nearness to the Rastafarian world. He reveals his struggle to develop a social conscience. He shouts a militant "yes!" to freedom of expression and the essential freedoms of all human beings.

As far as I am concerned, as a lover of the Cuban rap movement, I am prepared to make this sacrifice for a while, so long as my technical and human conditions allow me to do so. For me, a photograph is life, liberty, history. I understand all too well how hard it is to rescue the history of rap through photography in Cuba, when I am at the foot of the stage and I can't use the photography's most elemental rules because of poor lighting, good artistic directing, or absence of a suitable and stimulating background. Sometimes one because disenchanted, but I just take a deep breath and return to my objective. I once again focus and make do however I can to make the best of my sorry lenses and old cameras. Many things happen in Cuba rap, many of them avoidable. Cuban rap is in its adolescence. We all understand that, but it still deserves space and respect.

In a country where the lack of "positive," socializing, artistic models is each day more evident, it is a secret to no one that the documentation of alternative events is important to 'official' culture. Most of them are censored right along with the artists, both for the expression of their ideas and their increasing need to feel free and fulfilled. Yet, for know, none of these difficulties tire me.

I am still stimulated by difficulties; I enjoy the moment when I squeeze the shutter and see, through my own eyes, the precise moment. I am filled with feelings, with melodies. Each rapper's rhymes make the photos take on a special magic that is very close to the gestures of life. Each raised fist, each word, each dream is made reality for at least a brief moment, at least in that moment in which each one of us captures those seconds of immense freedom.