

Afro-Cuban Rap Legends Obsesion Talk Race, Gender and Hip-Hop at UCLA

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMAN

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¿Que bola?

Photo by Gabriel San Roman / OC Weekly

In a rare cultural exchange, veteran Cuban rap duo Obsesion visited UCLA as the university's week-long artists-in-residence. Magia Lopez Cabrera (Magia MC) and Alexey Rodriguez (...el tipo este...) form one of the most well-respected and longest-running hip-hop groups on the island having celebrated their 20th anniversary last summer. They masterfully mix Afro-Cuban percussion rhythms, jazz and socially conscious rhymes in their infectious brew (think A Tribe Called Quest meets Buena Vista Social Club).

With the UCLA library in a cultural heritage collaboration with the Cuban Hip-Hop Archive on the island, Obsesion spoke on a panel about their craft yesterday evening before giving a mini-performance perfect for the library's budding collection. The duo took questions first from Bruin professor Aisha Finch, whose book *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841-1844* is a must read that won the inaugural Harriet Tubman prize.

"One day, we had to perform and we chose the name Obsesion," Rodriguez said in Spanish. Professor Vanessa Diaz, a visiting scholar at UCLA from Cal State Fullerton, provided consecutive translations. The duo mulled over hundreds of possible monikers before the stage pressed the issue. While the rapper wished there was a more philosophical story behind the name, the political context from which the group emerged proved to be more in-depth. In the late 80's, break dancing culture took hold of youth on the inland, including Rodriguez.

"It gave us examples of who we could aspire to be, especially for Afro-Cubans," he said. But when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, it ushered in an economic crisis euphemistically known as the "Special Period" in Cuba. The joy of break dancing gave way to the hardship of being broke. Drug use, prostitution and violence emerged with Cubans looking for the next makeshift raft to the United States. While hip-hop formed in Brooklyn as a response to the devastation of Reaganomics in black neighborhoods, Afro-Cubans out of Alamar took refuge in making the culture their own. "Subconsciously, my generation found music as a way to escape and channel frustrations during these difficult times."



Alexey Rodriguez talks about Obsession's history in Cuban hip-hop

Photo by Gabriel San Roman / OC Weekly

Obsession responded by fusing activism with their groundbreaking rhymes. They teamed with Doble Filo for *La Fabri-K*, the first project to reflect their ethos. The duo began presenting workshops inside Cuban prisons in support of the album. And when the Cuban government stopped sponsoring annual rap festivals, Obsession stepped in, organizing heady Cuban Hip-Hop symposiums. "It wasn't just about educating others, it was about educating ourselves," Lopez said. The duality of their work provided a balance between the craft and consciousness of Cuban rap.

By the 2000s, Cuba's take on the genre piqued the interest of hip-hop heads outside the island. Rappers Common and Dead Prez traveled to Havana for the annual International Cuban Rap Festival. In 2003, Obsession was invited alongside Doble Filo to perform at the historic Apollo Theater for the first annual Hip-Hop Unity Concert, a bill that featured The Roots and Kanye West.

Back at home, Lopez, a former president of the Cuban Rap Agency, continued to poetically express feminist themes in her music. Her lyrics deal with broad societal issues like domestic violence and single motherhood but also goes in on Cuban rap encouraging women

to become protagonists in all its elements while critiquing men on the mic. "This hasn't come from male-dominated groups," she says. "This has come from women in hip-hop." The panel discussion paused to play the music video for Obsesion's classic "La llaman puta" (They Call Her Slut) off of *La Fabri-K*, a song delving into prostitution.

[Please read web version for embedded content]

More recently, the group released another classic *El Disco Negro (The Black Album)* in 2011, proving Afro-Cuban consciousness to be a forte of their rap repertoire. "With rap, we've identified the fury we held inside but didn't know how to express," Rodriguez said. "Hip-hop gave us the answers to why. Why are we stopped by police all the time? We don't we have more resources? Where isn't there more black history in schools? Why, why, why?"

The group pointed to massacre of Partido Independiente de Color members, formed almost entirely by formerly enslaved Afro-Cubans, in 1912 as something to be remembered. In Havana's Avenida de los Presidentes statues stand for Mexico's Benito Juarez, Chile's Salvador Allende, but also for Cuba's Jose Miguel Gomez who presided over the massacre during his term. Obsesion deals with the affront to Afro-Cubans on "Calle G" off of *El Disco Negro* where they call for the fall of the statue. The duo played another music video during the event for "Los Pelos," a song that was written in 1999 to criticize the lack of Afro-Cubans in popular culture, filmed in 2005 and awarded in 2010. "Welcome to Cuba!" Rodriguez joked about the song's timeline.

With limited time of their own, Obsesion took a few questions from the audience before performing two songs, "En tu barrio" and "Tú con tu ballet." Everyone wanted to know their relationship to the Cuban Revolution and what they saw in the future of the island after President Barack Obama's visit to normalize relations.

"What we always say is that the revolution isn't squared and fixed," Lopez said. "The revolution is a process and we are a part of that process. To speak out doesn't make you against it." In late 2014, **news emerged that the US tried to infiltrate the Cuban rap scene to foment anti-government sentiment**. But the plot proved an embarrassment and took its place among the CIA's own failed exploding cigars in the annals of hair-brained schemes against the Castro governments.

Rodriguez alluded to the scandal in mentioning that Cuban hip-hop is demeaned as a "ploy of imperialism" before defending the integrity of the craft stating that while they are very critical, they are still very much revolutionaries.



Who says libraries are quiet spaces?

Photo by Gabriel San Roman / OC Weekly

The musical movement itself has undergone its own ebbs and flows throughout the decade. The duo watched Professor Diaz's *Cuban Hip-Hop: Desde el Principio*, a documentary that first premiered in 2006, as part of their UCLA visit, but much has changed on the island and its rap scene since then. "One of the big things is that most of the people in the film are no longer in Cuba," Lopez said. Many of Cuba's groundbreaking hip-hop generation immigrated to the U.S. and other countries around the world, but a new generation has arisen on the island to keep the beat alive.

With an uncertain future ahead, one thing's for sure. The more things change, the more they stay the same. "There's more opening for tourism," Lopez said of the U.S. normalizing relations with Cuba. "But the blockade continues."

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