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Group urges U.S. to open cultural exchange with Cuba

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By Larry Blumenfeld

NEW YORK (Billboard) - Cuban pianist Chuchito Valdes would very much like for his famed jazz musician father to be allowed to perform again stateside.

So would more than 200 musicians, activists and government policymakers -- among them



Robert Browning of the World Music Institute and Rep. John Conyers Jr., D-Mich. -- who gathered in late April in Washington, D.C., for a two-day summit on changing U.S. policies on Cuba. The group convened at HR-57, a nonprofit arts organization named for a 1987 House resolution authored by Conyers that designated jazz "a rare and valuable American national treasure" worthy of federal support.

Since 2003, the Bush administration has prevented Cuban musicians from entering the United States through visa denials and has curtailed the ability of American musicians to travel there, via license restrictions. One of the most notable examples was the denial of a visa for veteran singer Ibrahim Ferrer to attend the Grammy Awards in 2004.

It also reversed the Clinton administration's policy of "people-to-people exchange," which in the late '90s started something of a renaissance for Cuban

musicians and their work in the States. Among those who participated in the celebrated cross-cultural performances was Chuco Valdes, Chuchito's father. Now, while the younger Valdes, who lives in Mexico, can perform stateside, his father, who lives in Cuba, is forbidden from doing so.

For many Cuban musicians, U.S. exposure is considered vital -- and some are willing to take tremendous risks for the chance to succeed. The issue took a tragic turn in April when Cuban reggaeton singer Elvis Manuel died while trying to cross from Cuba to Miami in a small boat.

The current campaign for a change in the Bush administration's policy was stimulated in fall 2007 by an impassioned open letter to American intellectuals and artists from Ballet Nacional de Cuba director Alicia Alonso.

"Let us work together so that Cuban artists can take their talent to the United States," Alonso wrote. Taking that spirit as his call to arms, Louis Head, executive director of U.S. Cuba Cultural Exchange, a national network of artists and presenters, devised an online letter petitioning the Bush administration to reverse its policy.

"The response to that letter was overwhelming," Head says. Among the hundreds who signed on were singer/songwriter Jackson Browne and guitarist/producer Ry Cooder, who collaborated with Cuban musicians for 1997's "Buena Vista Social Club," on which Ferrer, who died in 2005, played a key role.

Head hopes that since Fidel Castro has stepped down and a new U.S. administration will soon take office, the climate may be right for change. "What's important," he says, "is that we've organized arts presenters, agents, record company executives and educators to let Congress know how we feel."

"As far as I'm concerned, Cuba is a wellspring of talent and influence," says Blue Note Records president Bruce Lundvall, who signed Chucho Valdes to his label through a foreign imprint. "And I'd like that connection back."

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