

# Diplo and Major Lazer Bring Their Brand of Music to Cuba



Diplo and Major Lazer Headline in Havana

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Lisette Poole for The New York Times

By Joe Coscarelli

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HAVANA — “I know you’ve been waiting a long time for a party like this,” the D.J. and producer Diplo called out to a sea of pulsating young Cubans here on Sunday evening, during a free concert by his Caribbean-influenced electronic group, Major Lazer.

The spectacle at a waterfront plaza known as the José Martí Anti-Imperialist Platform, in front of the newly established United States Embassy, was remarkable: a seemingly endless crowd of an estimated 450,000 to a half-million stylish locals, largely teenagers, bouncing, dancing and roaring to amped-up electronic dance music, or E.D.M.

This was the first concert in Cuba by a major pop act from the United States since the [reinstatement of diplomatic relations](#) between the two countries in December 2014. (Pop acts very rarely made it to Cuba during the embargo; the last large-scale concert was by the band Audioslave in 2005.) It notably featured a youth-oriented genre — E.D.M. is a rising trend among Cubans after trickling down from a boom in the United States and Europe — and a globe-trotting star who’d been quietly plotting his way here for 14 months. The show was also government-approved, and therefore largely depoliticized, its restrictions demonstrating the continuing tension between life on this island for the past half-century and the Cuban culture of the future.

“It’s the very first time I’ve seen my generation so happy,” said Robin Pedraja, 28, the creative director of Vistar, an independent online culture magazine.

The concert was the culmination of a weekend in Havana for Major Lazer, which also includes the D.J.s and producers Walshy Fire (from Jamaica) and Jillionaire (from Trinidad) and is best known for its international megahit “Lean On.” The trip was “kind of a lofty idea,” Diplo said, “because I didn’t think these kids even knew our music.”

Unlike the presumably pan-generational concert in Havana by the Rolling Stones later this month — days after President Obama becomes the first American president to visit in 88 years — this trip was very much oriented to youth culture.

The visit included smaller parties and impromptu D.J. sets, along with a government-organized news conference. There was also a cultural-exchange panel — required for American artists playing in Cuba — with aspiring local producers and electronic musicians, who asked detailed questions about software, distribution and mixing and mastering techniques.

Fabien Pisani, a founder of Musicabana Foundation, a Cuban-American group that helped to organize the show with assistance and approval from the state-run Cuban Institute of Music, worked to bring Major Lazer for the opening event because “I didn’t want it to have a nostalgic act,” he said. “I’m not interested in Havana from the ’50s — I’m interested in Havana in 2050.” For his group, the concert was a momentum-building opening event before its international music festival in Havana in May.

Last month, Diplo won two Grammy Awards for his work with Jack Ü (a collaboration with the producer Skrillex), before setting off for Cuba, one of the few Caribbean nations where Major Lazer, with its reggaeton and dancehall influences, had yet to perform.

“The money D.J.s make is obnoxious and it’s not going to be around forever,” Diplo said in his room at Hotel Nacional, overlooking the growing crowd about an hour before he took the stage.

“I’m accepted, so I get those Vegas residencies,” he said of the lucrative nightclub gigs offered to E.D.M. stars. “But I didn’t start making music to do those residencies. I started making music to do cool things like this.”

With Diplo’s influence reaching new heights, the embargo at its most relaxed in a half-century and travel to Cuba becoming increasingly accessible, Major Lazer began exploring a concert in Havana over a year ago.

Being first was important to the group. “Other people were thinking about doing shows so we kind of expedited it,” Diplo said. “It’s not going to mean as much after this.” (He added of the Rolling Stones, “They’re English — they could’ve been coming here for years.”)

Major Lazer’s management team and Mr. Pisani worked to stir up interest with young people in Cuba by placing Major Lazer’s work on what is known as el paquete semanal, or the weekly package, a hand-to-hand digital distribution service that spreads bootlegs of songs, YouTube videos, news, movies and TV shows around the country via hard drives and USB devices.

“I paid them to put the music there with a vision for creating an audience for this concert,” Mr. Pisani said. (Diplo referred to the tactic as “inception.”)

If the reaction from those in Havana before the concert was any indication, the promotion worked. “Hey, D.J.!” street vendors yelled to Diplo at a popular flea market for tourists, encouraging him to browse their piles of vinyl records.

Giggling locals of all ages politely requested selfies with group members (and even their staffers), along with autographs on local newspaper articles about Major Lazer. “El paquete — I saw him there, on the Grammys,” one middle-aged woman said in Spanish after posing for a photo.

At one late-night dance party on Saturday away from the city center — where more than 2,000 people danced to E.D.M. remixes of Drake and the Weeknd under an ornate tree-fort structure — a guest D.J. set from Jillionaire drew chants of “Dee-plo! Dee-plo! Dee-plo!” although he was not present.

Jillionaire could only laugh. “Come see Diplo tomorrow,” Jillionaire told the crowd before playing “Lean On.”

Onstage at the plaza, Diplo waved a giant Cuban flag and was mirrored in the audience by fans who held up smaller American and Cuban flags — outnumbered only by those bearing the globelike logo for Major Lazer.

Yet the show brushed up against state control for a moment as Major Lazer was barred from welcoming unapproved Cuban musicians — including the rapper Yotuel Romero of the influential Latin rap group Orishas — onstage as surprise guests.

Using additional acts “wasn’t part of the contract,” Mr. Pisani said.

Mr. Pisani noted after the concert that Cuban officials “were watching us — it’s about building trust.”

“They are careful, because when you give the mike to a guy in front of 400,000 people ...” Mr. Pisani, 44, went on before trailing off.

“They are maybe anxious, but they understand it’s important. As public servants, they have a mission to provide entertainment to that generation — to those kids who have a different expectation of life than my generation or themselves.”

Orlando Vistel Columbié, president of the Cuban Institute of Music, said in Spanish after the show that Major Lazer had “established a very respectful relationship with the Cuban public and has been really respectful toward Caribbean roots in general.”

Major Lazer did its part to make sure the show went smoothly. Although the U.S. Treasury Department recently announced loosened regulations that allow American musicians to profit from musical events in Cuba, the group paid its own way, with representatives estimating costs at around \$150,000 for equipment and travel for a team of about two dozen. (The Cuban Institute of Music provided the venue, along with medical, fire and security services.)

Such a large-scale undertaking was made possible partly by the financial and social capital earned by Diplo in recent years. Known at first as an underground D.J. and party-giver with a penchant for borrowing esoteric world sounds and rhythms, he has since become a go-to hit maker for stars like Madonna, Beyoncé and Justin Bieber — the consummate outsider-turned-insider.

Ahead of the headlining event, Diplo acknowledged his reputation as “that special gringo” and reflected on the popularity of E.D.M. in a place where traditional music has been passed down through generations because of the narrow channels for discovery.

“Of course they’re going to be into electronic music — it’s so accessible,” he said of young people with more access to the Internet, adding that this modern incarnation of dance music is not politicized. “Major Lazer is just the quintessential, easy-enough group to make it make some sense.”

“This is the beginning — we’re writing the story right now for these kids,” Diplo added. “It’s going to be different from here on out.”

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