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Rolling out The Stones in Cuba



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REGI VARGHESE explores the historic significance of Cuba's first Rolling Stones concert

I grew up in a time when anything from my parents' generation was unfashionable. So it's quite strange that I idolised bands like The Rolling Stones, whose members are my mother's age. Even stranger is the fact that my son's phone is crammed with songs like 'Honky Tonk Woman', 'Jumpin Jack Flash' and 'Satisfaction', performed by a band that's his grandparents' generation.

The Rolling Stones have been the original bad boys of rock for over 50 years, and it looks like the only thing that never goes out of style is – rebellion.

I still remember the horrified look on my parents' face when I asked them if I could grow my hair long like Mick Jagger. Long hair was banned at home and frowned upon in school.

But as soon as I went to college, I did grow my hair out a bit. Banning something is a sure-fire way of increasing demand for it.

Last Friday's historic Rolling Stones concert in Cuba is testimony to that. Over half a million music-starved fans turned up for a two-hour rollicking concert by a bunch of seventy-year-old men they'd only heard on bootlegged records passed hand to hand.

The Stones performance even overshadowed a visit by Obama a few days earlier, the first visit to Cuba by a US President in nearly a hundred years. The Stones manager jokingly said that Obama's visit was the opening act for the real act to follow.

This concert isn't significant merely as the first Rolling Stones concert in Cuba; but as a larger political move, which sees Cuba finally getting rid of the last vestiges of its hangover from the strife of the Cold War.

And it wasn't just the older folks who had been deprived of **music** for two decades who were there at the gig. From the clips I saw on TV, the huge crowd, estimated to be at least 500,000, consisted of teenagers, middle-aged men and women, and septuagenarians from all walks of life.

Even though many Western bands have performed in Cuba before, none of these acts have been as big as the Rolling Stones, and the sheer size of this event is unparalleled. The enormous cost of transporting and setting up the 500 tonnes of equipment was borne by the band and their partners.

The band is partnering with musical equipment companies such as the Gibson Foundation, Gretsch and Pearl in a "musician-to-musician initiative" that will deliver quality instruments and equipment to Cuban musicians, who have been deprived of these for decades due to trade embargoes.

Two very different worlds collided on Friday night and I couldn't help but think of the one thing that Cuba's communist regime and the Rolling Stones have in common – their longevity. Cuba's left-wing Government has defied all expectations and outlasted its former ally, the Soviet Union, and the Rolling Stones continue to rock n roll and sell out stadiums world over, 54 years after their inception.

Jagger spoke in Spanish throughout the 18-song concert that lasted over two hours, because most of the crowd didn't understand English. As the band closed the gig with their anthem, 'I Can't get no Satisfaction', the crowd sang along. They got what they came for – an onslaught of sound and lights, the gritty riffs of Keith Richards, the moves of Jagger, songs they had heard in hiding, sounding as fresh as they were half a century ago. Years of pent-up yearning were gone. Cuban music fans were finally – after 54 years – satiated, and comprehensively 'Stoned'.

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