

Film project: The Heartbeat of a Country

Kurt Hartel, who holds a doctorate in physics, has independently produced a cinematic, movie about Cuban music. He understood the phenomenon and didn't fall for popular clichés.

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In the middle of the studio are the drums, the Cuban flag stuck onto them: blue and white stripes, a white star on a red triangle. The drums are surrounded by saxophones and clarinets, a string bass and a piano. On the walls, drawings made by Cuban artists, next to them a Greek Aphrodite and a Bavarian garden gnome. In the air the faint smell of tobacco. "I hope you don't mind", says Kurt Hartel with a smirk. He likes smoking cigars. Cuba was the perfect place for him.

The amateur jazz musician has produced a cinematic film about Cuban music - independently, self financed with a six-figure sum. He has spent six years of his life on this project. He approached the country and its people without any voyeurism, gave musicians and scientists the time and the space to talk about their music and accompanied jazz musicians, classic violinists, female drummers, dancers and children in their rehearsal rooms or their studios. From that emerged a 90-minute movie, full of passion and completely professional. Hartel is about to submit it to various film festivals.



Of course there had to be a cruise with vintage car. (photo: Kurt Hartel/Lautrazfilm)

Only since Wim Wender's movie about Ry Cooder and "Buena Vista Social Club" has the world seemed to know about Cuban music. But Hartel's work goes much deeper in terms of how he devotes the movie and himself to the music. "As a jazz musician I did see quite a bit of the world. But I've never experienced anything like what I experienced in Cuba anywhere else", he says.

Since his youth, Hartel has played drums and tenor saxophone in a jazz band. He lives with his wife in an old detached farmhouse in Pallhausen, just outside Freising. There he can play music to his heart's content. At the end of a rehearsal with his band in 2006, while they were just having their final beer, someone said: We should go to Cuba together, I've heard there are many brilliant musicians. "Three weeks later we were there", says Hartel.

There they met the saxophonist César López, one of the best jazz musicians of Latin America. He introduced them to his colleagues, recommended people and clubs to get to know, and concerts they had to go to. And on literally every street corner they came across talented singers or musicians. "That's when I knew: I have to make a movie about this musical richness." That is how "Musica Cubana - a story to be told" came into being. Kurt Hartel, born in 1946, already did many different things in his life. Born in Franconia, he holds a doctorate in physics and worked in science. He is passionate about mountaineering and loves to ski. And he's always thinking about new projects, as he likes to call them. He has worked in real estate, produced cider, was part of the music industry and produced a couple of CDs with full time musicians. He is not so fond of taking orders, but when he is convinced of an idea he goes the whole way, and applies high standards to himself and his team.



The cigar reminds Kurt Hartel of Cuba.
(photo: Marco Einfeldt)

He took this same in-depth approach to the Cuban project. The key to the Cuban culture is the clave, "that was evident pretty quickly". The syncopation, the "clack-clack" of the wood-blocks, serve as the leitmotif of the movie. It's in the blood of every musician, every dancer, every kid on the street. There are hundreds of variations of it and you can hear it in the song of the old men at the hotel bar just as in the energetic sound of a salsa big band. The camera is always in the thick of it, and the audience feels the energy instantly.

Long ago, the rhythms of the African slaves were blended with the harmonies and the melodies of the Spanish colonists. "Until today the music assimilates foreign influences without putting the name *fusion* on it. It just happens while playing", explains Hartel. The music is the heartbeat of Cuba, a country in which exist more conservatoires than anywhere else in the world. They are free.

"The rumba was the spiritual relief of the slaves", says a female musician in the movie, "we can feel this emotion of freedom until now in the music." For 300 years slavery shaped this country. Today black and white children sit side by side in the classroom.



In Hartel's movie outstanding musicians, like the drummer Yissy García, talk about their music.

(photo: private)

Hartel has a soft spot for children. He and his wife support Marina Ruíz Garmendía, who plays an essential part in the movie. She takes kids from the street, teaches them *comparsa*, special dances of the carnival, and through this conveys to them - with her natural authority - a part of their cultural identity.

Even at home Hartel wears a *guayabera*, a typical Cuban shirt made of linen with pockets and fancy seams. He smokes cigars. And of course there are photos of him and his team cruising in a pink vintage car through Havana. But he didn't fall for the all-too-popular clichés, and he has avoided any political references. In the movie there's nothing of the faded myth of the revolution or the growing gap between the poor and the rich, or the exodus of artists and intellectuals who didn't want to wait for a better life. But it is precisely because Hartel focused only on the music that he created a movie of impressive intensity. Trick ski legend and experienced sports film maker Fuzzy Garhammer accompanied him as a mentor and a friend. Hartel himself was responsible for the script and the direction. "Many scenes were shot spontaneously, in a country like Cuba it's impossible to plan everything", he

says. "And often this way of shooting results in very emotional moments because you give the protagonists space to express themselves."

For example the moment when Emilio Morales, pianist, composer, arranger and bandleader, takes his seat at the piano to explain the principle of the claves. "Clack-clack" is heard when he presses some keys. And then he suddenly starts playing a nocturne by Chopin, just to change into a wild play with different rhythms - without letting go of Chopin's original melody. Or the female drummer who appears at the rehearsal with her four year old son - who naturally and very seriously takes a pair of sticks in his hands. When the band starts to play his mother plays the drums and he the timbales. The beat is always on time. Or the girl lingering in an entrance in Old Havana. Seemingly unseen, she moves dreamily to a song which is only playing in her head.



Young children already growing up with the rhythm of their country.

(photo: private)

That Hartel doesn't speak any Spanish didn't bother him while shooting. He had an interpreter at his side, but "often the nonverbal communication connects people better than the *ratio*", says the physicist. Wherever he travelled, India, Nepal, Kenya, "I always communicated and interacted with people. As a mountaineer or a musician it's pretty easy. You don't need arguments. You just have to delete your inner hard drive and get rid of prejudices and clichés."

Hartel worked on the movie for six years. He was on the island more than 20 times. He overcame innumerable obstacles, and experienced many periods in which he was close to quitting. Because in the beginning he didn't have a work visa. Because scheduled interviews were cancelled. Because it was too difficult to put into effect the idea he had in mind. After 5 years of preparatory work he was at that point again at the end of 2017: he wanted to give up. But then he got to know a Cuban film crew, and shot the whole film in five months. Postproduction took place at home. "Cuba wouldn't be Cuba, if out of seemingly hopeless situations there couldn't evolve something new."