

# John Lennon in quarantine: A letter from Havana<sup>1</sup>

Merriam Ansara

John Lennon is in quarantine. He, or at least his bronze sculpture, sits on a bench in the leafy park at 17th & 6th Street in Vedado, as though inviting visitors to sit next to him and have a chat. At the foot of the bench is the inscription in Spanish: You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.

The park is in the Carmelo district of Vedado. Until March, the park received a steady stream of foreign visitors arriving both in Havana's famed classic cars and on foot. The guard on duty, from a group of local retirees called back into to service, held on to Lennon's famous glasses, bringing them over to the visitors so they could sit on the bench and have their picture taken with John Lennon (the retirees were hired after quite a few of John Lennon's glasses were stolen). Nearby in the early mornings a regular group of elders would practice Tai Chi with one of the hundreds of Sports Institute and Wushu Institute trained instructors, usually also retirees. On the weekends a famed Cuban baseball pitcher who lived in the neighborhood would come out for coaching sessions with the neighborhood youngsters.

El Carmelo is also home to another Cuban institution well known to visitors and Cubans alike: El Fabrica del Arte, a former oil factory that for at least a decade has housed a complex of discos, art galleries, restaurants and other event venues.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published on the *Counterpunch* website on 9 April 2020 (<https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/04/09/john-lennon-in-quarantine-a-letter-from-havana/>).

And it also is home to the best Guarapo stand in Havana, at 17th and 24th. Here the sugar cane stalks are ground directly into a bucket of ice and served up sweet and cold, 1 peso for a small glass, 2 pesos for a large.

Though Old Havana is known as the city's tourism center, Vedado has also long been known for its rotating population of foreign visitors, both living in its many rental units and B&Bs and frequenting its many restaurants and other venues. For this reason also it was not surprising to find that a number of cases of Covid-19 were found in that neighborhood. All Covid-19 cases to date have been from either visitors from abroad or Cubans returning from abroad or direct contacts with these two groups. Only recently have there been cases that have jumped to a third person, known as "local spread".

All regular activity came to a halt on Friday evening, April 3, 2020, at 8:00 pm. On March 23rd, 12 days after the first case of Covid-19 in Cuba, the government had activated the Councils of Defense, Cuba's Civil Defense famed worldwide for its ability to respond rapidly and efficiently to any kind of natural disaster. The Havana Defense Council had determined that there was a grave danger of Covid-19 spread in the neighborhood. The Municipal Delegate, the People's Council, and the entire infrastructure of family doctors and polyclinics agreed.

As of 8 pm, the entire neighborhood that stretches from 6th Street to 28th, Malecon to 21st, roughly the area between Paseo and the Almendares River below 23rd Street, is closed to entry and exit. Anyone with a need to enter or leave must prove that they have been tested and are free of Covid-19. The Civil Defense will ensure that all necessary supplies are brought into the neighborhood stores. The medical personnel will be checking regularly on the most vulnerable in the population. Social workers will be enlisted to help and will also help with classes. Buses traveling through the area will be restricted.

This approach to epidemic is not new in Cuba in my memory. I remember in the 1980s a section of Vedado being shut off following discovery of a single tetanus case. I also remember in the 1970s troops of patrolling nurses in white seeking out anyone not vaccinated against measles in the neighborhood in which I and my little daughter then lived. They were an impressive and determined sight. Just a few years ago when a friend contracted dengue, neighborhood patrols went searching for the source of standing water that could breed the dengue (*Aedes aegypti*, also a carrier of chikungunya, Zika, Mayaro and yellow fever) and so most likely responsible for the friend's dengue. The source was found and the resident responsible was fined.

How many cases of Covid-19 occasioned this lock down? 8 as of Friday. That may not seem like many, but Cuba takes its approach to public health very very seriously. 8 cases in such a limited area means that there is local spread, as discovered previously in another neighborhood locked down in Pinar del Rio's Consolación del Sur. Local spread, unlike community spread, means that you can trace the virus as it hops from person to person. Community spread means that you can't trace the virus and it's rapidly moving out of control. This the Cuban authorities are trying to prevent, so far, 21 days into the virus, successfully. And hence the lockdown of El Carmelo.

As a matter of fact living in Havana these days as I am feels liking being

enfolded in a warm blanket of care and concern. Every day there is a televised press conference at 11 am with detailed information on the number of new cases and how each of the patients is doing. Each day there is a meeting of the President and Cabinet, the details of which are relayed by television to the population. Each day there are special concerts by the country's leading musicians broadcast over the airwaves. Each day there is the Mesa Redonda on television starting at 6 pm or 7 pm where the country's leaders explain exactly what is happening and what needs to be done. Each day at 8 pm on the news there is more information. Each day there are programs about what you need to do, what you can do, how Cuba's laws and regulations work, what the best ways are to protect yourself and others. Each day there are teams of medical students knocking on your door to ask how you are. At the family doctor's office where I am volunteering mornings, there is a steady stream of people in and out, consulting the doctor, bringing babies for regular vaccinations, or even telling the doctor what's available that day at the neighborhood store. In the afternoons, Dr. Marta spends visiting her elderly or otherwise vulnerable patients, taking shifts at the neighborhood policlinic, or following up on the findings of her medical student volunteers. As well, she supervises a group of Kenyan medical students doing their residency in Cuba.

At today's press conference, the National Director of Epidemiology, Dr. Francisco Duran, after running through each and every case and how they are doing (we are up to 312 cases), said he wanted to take some time to explain the difference to us between the various tests that are being used. Yesterday he explained the evolution period of the disease. Today he said that the rapid test kits that Cuba has just been able to get are to measure the antibodies in people who are suspected of harboring the virus (these are the kits that Cuba had trouble getting into the Island, I believe, because the owner of Alibaba balked at challenging the US embargo); they don't actually rule out the virus; they are a quick and reliable way to see who needs further following up on. The PCR test is a real time proof positive test. He explained how each is used and how we can understand. That is a hallmark of everything we are being told: The health authorities believe that if we have the most information possible, we will be able to make the best judgments. (Information has been a hallmark of the Cuban Revolution since the very beginning; it was the basis of the Literacy Campaign: An educated population will make the best decisions about building their own and our collective future.)

Everyone is wearing cloth masks in the streets. The Public Health authorities have been unequivocal about this since the beginning: Too many people are asymptomatic or don't show symptoms until it is too late. Social distancing is an established protocol (*Quédate en la casa!*) but one not always easy to enforce in Cuba, especially in Havana. Too many people, in fact everyone, must go to the store regularly and form lines when scarce and needed goods like chicken or detergent come in. Cuba has dealt with epidemics before: Hemorrhaging dengue at home; Cholera in Haiti; Ebola in Africa. You cannot control people coughing sneezing spitting. In a society without cars and dependent on daily shopping it is not feasible for everyone to stay indoors all of the time. A physical barrier between each person's nose & mouth and everyone else's is a reasonable precaution. There

are endless programs and signs on how to care for your masks, how to make them so you have more than one, how to clean yourself before you reenter your house, what precautions to take when you go out. All stores and the few remaining restaurants (mostly take out) have bottles of Hypochlorite, this country's low cost solution to personal and household disinfectant, at the door. Police are on hand to try to ensure that people in the long lines in front of stores are maintaining 2 meters distance. Some stores are trying novel approaches, such as handing out tickets for your turn.

Face masks are now taken for granted in this society of ours here. We're used to hearing the President's voice a bit muffled behind his mask. We're used to seeing his cabinet sitting every other chair, sporting a variety of homemade masks of different colors and patterns. We've gotten used to people crossing the street when they see us coming and don't take it personally. We've gotten used to the smell of chlorine in hypochlorite and to the rituals of entering our homes: take off shoes, sprinkle hypochlorite on hands and rub vigorously, clean off the dog's paws with hypochlorite and then water, open the door and then clean off key and doorknob with hypochlorite, shed clothing and mask as soon as step in the door, wash hands, take shower, don inside clothes, carry on.

This is still Cuba, though, irrepressible as ever. The other evening I asked my nephew to take me to a friend's house in Atarés. It was her birthday and I had some chicken for her. As we rode down Calzada de Cerro we marveled at how empty it was; how there was almost no foot traffic and the buses were half empty. Erik had just commented on how proud he was of his fellow Cubans even keeping the children inside. Then we turned into Atarés and pre-Covid Havana came into view: Every doorway had one or two people sitting in it, people strolled the street, children played marbles in a bunch. The only difference was that everyone was wearing a face mask.

Some of my Cuban friends will complain that I don't understand Cuba; I'm not Cuban. It's just because Cubans feel that they are so well taken care of by the government that they don't need to comply 100%. In this, though, I think that Cubans are very much like everyone everywhere: there is a degree to which the danger is simply not real; and in Cuba's case, the nature of the Cuban people is not to go shopping or do other such practices that we might consider risky but to hang out with their neighbors.

And I might add, while there is Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, there is no Zoom. When you try to go to the Zoom site it says: 403 Forbidden. What's with that? The rest of the world is using Zoom and we in Cuba can't?

So back to John Lennon. The thing about John Lennon is that in many ways he sums up many of the ideals of the Cuban Revolution, or at least Cubans see it that way. His dream was of world peace; Cuba's dream is even broader: not just world peace, but world community and collaboration. Everyone here — everyone — is supportive of every step Cuba is taking to send help wherever they are asked. Oh, I'm sure you can find a few disaffected whiners and complainers, but the goals of the Cuban Revolution are deeply, deeply ingrained in even the most alienated youth or hardened elders. Fidel planted the seeds of solidarity: Revolution is the sense of the historic moment; it is changing everything that must be changed; it is full

equality and liberty; it is being treated and treating all others as human beings;... it is defending the values in which we believe at any cost; it is modesty, lack of self-interest, altruism, solidarity and heroism...

These seeds, though, fed the essential nature of the people of Cuban and I think mostly likely would feed all humans allowed to flourish within the cosmos of such caring. We see in the United States so many people rising to be their best selves in the face of this adversity, despite the cringing narcissism, bullying, misrepresentation and lack of values at the top. Cuba is exceptional, but it is exceptional because it has been asked and made the decision to be so: Cuba knows that it is fighting for its own survival and that its own survival depends on the survival of all of us.

Every night at 9 pm. We all go out on our balconies or lean out our windows and we clap and clap. We clap for our medical personnel, at home and abroad. We clap out of enthusiasm and out of kindness. We clap for the essential workers keeping our society going. We clap our expectations and hopes for the future.