

Exerpt from

FUJILOVE

ALL THINGS FUJI X

August 2016



The World Is My Studio

by Bert Stephani

BJORN MOERMAN
RINZI RUIZ
WALEED SHAH
KEVIN RABER
ADRIAN MURRAY
DAVID JULIAN
STEVE THOMAS



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DAVID JULIAN

PHOTOGRAPHING THE HEART AND SOUL OF CUBA

Cuba has quickly become a hot destination amongst photographers lured by endless textures, architecture, antique cars, great cigars, and colorful personalities. I'd been wanting to visit there for a decade, but had never made it happen. I was also looking for an excuse to move into a mirrorless camera system to gain cutting-edge features and to lighten my load during travel workshops. Both came together with a timely call from a friend and former student.



Fuji 18-55 @31.5mm 1/125 @ f5 ISO 400 Manual Exposure



Fuji 18-55 @18mm 1/125 @ f4.5 ISO 400 Manual Exposure



Fuji 10-24 @21mm 1/180 @ *f*22, ISO 200 Manual Exposure

Skip's enthusiasm for learning photography and collecting prints steered him into a daunting project. He invited me and several other photographers to join "In the Footsteps of Walker Evans," a project he'd created to document modern Cuba in locations where Evans had photographed in the early 1930's. This journey re-fueled my Cuban interest, and I saw an opportunity to improve my travel portraiture and street photography, and to dive into mirrorless. I've always loved the work of photojournalists and street photographers, boldly stepping into foreign cultures to capture humanity in graphic fractional moments. By contrast, I had been shooting in the contemplative approach of a landscape, editorial and travel photographer. I looked forward to responding to the rhythm of Cuba, both to interpret active life on the streets and also to document workers and families.

As I studied Evans' images of Cuba, I envisioned working partly in toned B&W, and I'd learned that The Fuji X cameras' electronic viewfinders could be set to 'see' in B&W for composing without the distraction of color. I was eager to see how a Fuji X system would expand my photographic abilities in Cuba.

I prepared my visual palette by researching the work of both historic and contemporary Cuban photographers. From Alberto Korda's most iconic portrait of the young

beret-wearing revolutionary Ché Guevara, to today's journalistic styles by top Cuban photographers. A Google image search for "Cuban Photographers" revealed pages of B&W and color thumbnails where I stumbled into the incredible work of Raul Cañibano. His images blew me away, with their magical realism that combined the timing and balance of Henri Cartier-Bresson, the wit of Elliott Erwitt and the stark surrealities of Diane Arbus.

I rented a Fuji X-T1 that weekend, and went test shooting in Seattle's waterfront and cobblestoned markets. I was quickly smitten by the camera's feel and manual controls, and chose the Monochrome+Y setting, and RAW+JPEG. Using the bright EVF, I enjoyed seeing in B&W. My own X-T1 arrived a week later, the day before my departure to Cuba. I greedily devoured the user's manual and read Tony Phillips' helpful X-T1 eBook on my flight to Miami and Havana. When the charter flight's cabin door opened, tropical Havana wafted in. Soon I was in the streets to get a feel for the pace of Old Havana. It was tempting to begin shooting, but I always tune my senses before shooting in a new environment. I noted my input: hammering, dog barking, color, cooking, textures, faces, curiosity, salt air, engines, exhaust, and everywhere, rapid Spanish. As my goal was to interpret the flavor of Cuba, all this information would help guide my expression. My X-T1 and 18-55 were set and ready for



Fuji 18-55 @35.8mm 1/70 @ f3.6 ISO 400 Manual Exposure



Fuji 10-24 @21mm 1/30 @ f4.5 ISO 250 Aperture Priority



Fuji 10-24 @20mm 1/60 @ f10, ISO 320 Manual Exposure



Fuji 10-24 @15mm 1/2 @ f5 ISO 250 Manual Exposure



Fuji 10-24 @13.2mm 1/180@ f4 ISO 6400 Manual Exposure



Fuji 18-55 @35.8mm 1/250@ f4 ISO 250 Manual Exposure

opportunities. My 23mm and 10-24 zoom waited in my canvas messenger bag. When I finally began shooting, the X-T1 seemed like a familiar friend. I switched to manual focus whenever I needed precise control for shooting low depth of field. Compared to the large, face-obscuring DSLR's used by others I was with, the X-T1's small profile was also less obtrusive to people I approached for portraits. I also panned the endless varieties of transportation, and captured the vine-wrapped scaffolds surrounding crumbling historic facades. I began to relax into the pace of Old Havana, with my techniques down and my spirits high.

The following day after attending a slide lecture on Cuban photography, I was sitting under a shaded awning in Plaza de Vieja, discussing photography with Jorge Gavilondo, Arian 'Chang' Castan and to my delight, Raul Cañabano. Raul's English was as weak as my Spanish, so we sometimes spoke through Jorge, and pantomimed the rest with humor. During the lecture, Raul revealed that many of his earlier images were made with a beat up SLR and film developed in a used X-Ray developer 'borrowed' from the radiology department at a local hospital. Cuban photographers are resourceful and driven to succeed despite financial limitations. Their stories of sacrifice and dedication inspired and grew

my admiration. This was the first of many stories that humbled me and the photographers I was touring with. I also noted that many Cuban pro's leave vintage autos and cigar smoking out of their frames to avoid travel story clichés. It's about composing the light on a truthful moment, surprise gifts and the pulse of life itself. At a print show, I saw how the younger Cuban shooters captured chaotic festivals and graphically re-defined the saying 'owning the frame'. I began seeing Cuba anew, through their images and discussions.

As a former designer, I learned to compose precisely for visual balance and eye movement, and to shoot alternates with cropping room for editors and art directors. Many of the Cubans' images were devoid of traditional formalities, but riveting and lyrical none the less. Their work 'sounded' like a garage band, with freshness and raw power. They inspired me to take more risks, and to allow key elements to kiss the edges of the frame. I recalled a recent conversation with National Geographic's Sam Abell, where he spoke of building the frame in layers from back to front. He said there has to be context in the background to give the main subject its story, and that too had to be micro-composed as well as the entire frame. Composing in the X-T1's EVF was so enjoyable that I turned off the back LCD entirely



Fuji 18-55 @18mm 1/30 @ *f*3.6 ISO 640 Manual Exposure



Fuji 10-24 @10mm 1/60 @ *f*7.1, ISO 640 Manual Exposure



「
Fuji 55-200 @95mm 1/1000 @ f5.6 ISO 250 Manual Exposure
」



Fuji 18-55 @37mm 1/60 @ *f*3.6, ISO 200 Shutter Priority

except for reviewing uncertain captures. I also shot lots of intense Cuban color as we travelled, especially in Trinidad.

We left our hotel most mornings before dawn to catch first light as Havana stirred awake. The morning glow, late afternoon fade and muted dusk tones became a painterly space to make long-exposure portraits of the real Cuba with few tourists. Having a tripod with me proved helpful for keeping my ISO low when shooting longer exposures or into shadows. I used a variable neutral density filter when I needed extra-slow shutter speeds. Vintage autos in all states of disrepair whizzed by my panning lens, and the funkier they were, the more interesting to me. I also learned to shoot from waist level with the 18-55 or 23, and could use the tilting LCD and Electronic Shutter to unobtrusively make portraits while speaking with locals. Shooting the X-T1 in full manual mode offered great control in the mixed light of Cuba. When in more even lighting, or if shooting action, I chose autofocus and often aperture priority or shutter priority modes. I found the X-T1's facial recognition focusing to be very helpful when making fast portraits or those facing towards me. A wider AF pattern worked perfectly for shooting with open apertures, and I used spot metering and narrow AF patterns for much of my street work. I loved that the EVF allowed me to see actual depth of field without dimming the frame as I'd had to do for two previous decades. I took advantage of Custom Settings to

quickly adapt to the many situations and moods I wanted to capture. I even made a cheat sheet of these settings onto a mailing label and adhered it behind the tilting LCD. I made audio notes into my iPhone to record the contact info of my subjects.

Once out in the mountainous rural farmlands of Viñales, life slowed down and so did my daily routines. I still caught sunrises, but daily siestas gave me time to rest or process my RAF's in Lightroom to gauge my progress or see what I needed to revisit. Tobacco farms, dirt roads, horses and simpler dwellings provided stark contrast to the tall, crumbling apartments of Old Havana. Late light casted longer shadows on the wide and quiet streets. At the end of each day, we returned to the comforts of our hotel, grabbed a Mojito and talked of the day's adventures. I began to realize that in the hotels with their uniformed hotel employees, I was not experiencing a casual Cuban connection. Our itinerary did not allow for very much time to sit with locals as they were not even allowed in our hotel. Only the local photographers could visit beyond the lobby. I vowed to return to Cuba and stay only in 'Casas Particulares', the family-owned B&B's registered with the Cuban government. That way I'd have a deeper connective experience and keep more tourist dollars in the communities.

The following Spring, my partner Jill and I returned illegally via Mexico, as many Americans have for decades. There was some risk involved in going to Cuba without a license or 'official' purpose, but our plans built in some



Fuji 23 1/180@ f5 ISO 400 Manual Exposure





Fuji 23 1/125 @ f5, ISO 800 Manual Exposure



Fuji 18-55 @37mm 1/60 @ f3.6, ISO 1250 Manual Exposure

contingencies and I had Corbis and Press paperwork ready just in case. We had booked a few night's stay in old Havana at a privately-owned casa, but as often happens, our rooms were not available when we arrived. Things break and somehow get fixed, which is very much the Cuban way.

In my wanderings and planned photo opportunities, one thing became very clear: I was in love with the Fuji system, and there was no going back to the heavier world of full frame DSLR's. I found that by design, the X-T1 was matched to my style of shooting, and enhanced my overall experience. I shot all portraits in natural light, using only very occasional bounce from whatever was handy. I chose to leave my imported raws as RAF in Adobe Lightroom, as I often work in Capture One as well. My B&W images were processed at 16-bit through NIK Silver Effects Pro because it has more advanced B&W and toning controls than Lightroom, plus the ability to emulate characteristics of favorite films I used in the past. I established several custom settings in both the X-T1 and also Lightroom for getting the most out of each 'keeper' image.

Over the next few weeks, the families we met at our casa's became friends, and also conduits for photographic opportunities we could never have arranged if in hotels. Soon we were enmeshed in meeting generations of Cubans, making family portraits, and became guests at a wild party for an older woman whose vitality defied her age. While touring, I gave out several small prints or a copy of the small 8" square books of photographs I'd made on my prior visit. I had written my books in English and Spanish, and used them as gifts or to communicate my ideas and intentions clearly. I became determined to create a photographic tour, centered around the authentic Cuban experience.

Now, two years later, Skip's "In the Footsteps of Walker Evans" is about to release as a documentary film and traveling exhibit. Having learned a lot about Cuban travel, I'm returning to Cuba this October with twelve photographers to go even deeper into the "Heart and Soul" of Cuba. By then, I'll have an X-T2 and several prints to gift back to those who I've photographed. I have also located a Cuban group in need of donated digital cameras, so I hope to help more Cubans express themselves through photography.

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