



DRSEA INFORMER

Volume V, Issue 3: A Publication For Your Reading Enjoyment

Entre “Sugar” Y “Pelotero” (Between “Sugar” and “Pelotero”). . . . lies the truth.

I finally got a chance to see “**BALLPLAYER: Pelotero**,” the controversial documentary that bills itself as a gritty look inside the world of baseball in the Dominican Republic.

As someone who first documented that world a dozen years ago, and presented a report to Major League Baseball that resulted in MLB opening an office in the Dominican Republic, I would like to think I have a pretty fair understanding of the industry, particularly as it has evolved over the years.

While “*Pelotero*” is provocative and entertaining, I do not think it presents a fair and accurate view of baseball in the Dominican Republic, in part because it focuses on the negatives and doesn’t fully take into account the measures Major League Baseball has taken to address those negatives.



Scene from “Pelotero”

Many of the cast of characters in the film are people I know, and I think the film goes out of its way to portray some as villains. In particular, I felt for Astin Jacobo, who develops young

players in the Dominican Republic and barter them to MLB teams. Some would call him a *buscone*, a term Jacobo considers derogatory to someone like himself who understands that baseball is a business, and that he performs a necessary service. My dealings with Astin have always been professional and courteous; he was one of the first trainers I know who embraced the need for reform in baseball in the Dominican Republic, asking only that decisions be inclusive of all vested interests, not just Major League Baseball's.



Astin Jacobo and me

Another flaw of the film is that MLB's input is not included, though a disclaimer says MLB declined to participate. I have heard opposing reports, but I can't help but believe that MLB, given the slant of the film, would have taken the opportunity to defend itself in what is certainly an unflattering portrayal of baseball in the Dominican Republic.

The film was shot over nine months in 2009, right when the movement to reform baseball was just beginning, and while "*Pelotero*" does acknowledge steps taken by MLB to address some of the corruption, much of the film's central issues of age and identity fraud are different today than three years ago. I don't think the same documentary could be filmed today, though issues of identity and age fraud remain, as does steroid usage and unethical practices in the procurement of players.

To date, I can reflect on only two films that I think give honest portrayals of baseball in Latin America. One is "*Sugar*," which, while fictional, gives an accurate rendition of the life of a Dominican baseball player. The other is "*BUSCON*," a documentary by award-winning director Anthony Alcalde, that examines the world of *buscones* with fairness and veracity, a world I have frequently referred to as a "necessary evil" whose evil components need to be weeded out.

I think my biggest problem right now is the media's fixation on what is wrong with Dominican baseball without at least taking into account what is being done to make it right. As an advocate for reform, I have seen much change in the 12 years since I first documented for Major League Baseball many of the issues that have since come under scrutiny, and a lot of that change has come in the four years I have lived in this country. But the media still tends to focus on the negative, on the sensational.

A couple of months ago, I was contacted by a British television station interested in doing a documentary on Dominican baseball, including how the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy fits into the equation; we have always advocated that education of Dominican baseball players must be incorporated into the industry.

While I was originally given assurances that the documentary would be a “fair and balanced” portrayal of baseball in the Dominican Republic, on the eve of the film crew’s trip to the country I was told that the documentary would focus solely on *buscones*, which alone is only one small aspect of the big picture. I never heard from the Brits again, leaving me to suspect that soon there will be one more aggrandized “true account” of Dominican baseball that may draw viewers through its salaciousness, but will do nothing to accurately and fairly depict the business of baseball in this country.

I have yet to see the media at large document the positives the reform movement has brought, the measures Major League Baseball has undertaken to make things better.

I have yet to read or see anything substantive about MLB’s newest educational initiative (see below) to help prospects who have transitioned out of baseball.

I have yet to read or see anything substantive about Josefina Carrion, the new education coordinator Major League Baseball hired to oversee and review education programs that each MLB team has been mandated to develop.



Josefina Carrion

I have yet to read or see anything substantive about programs and activities initiated by Kim Ng, senior vice president of baseball operations for Major League Baseball, to better showcase Dominican talent, particularly older players, which will help to minimize abuses. Ng is a visionary I think will one day be given serious consideration to be the commissioner of baseball.



Kim Ng

I have yet to read or see anything substantive about Rafael Perez, who heads MLB's Dominican Republic office, and is quietly, but effectively working to change the landscape of Dominican baseball for the better. As someone who has come up through the system, gone to college on a baseball scholarship, played professional baseball, worked in international player development, there are few others as knowledgeable and capable as Perez to make the decisions necessary to improve conditions for everyone in Dominican baseball, but most importantly the young prospects on whose skills the future of baseball depends.

When the media takes notice and reports on some of these positives in the Dominican Republic, the plethora of negatives that continue to be a focus of Dominican baseball can at least be put into perspective.

Understand, it is not my job or intention to defend Major League Baseball and its activities, but many of the initiatives the league has undertaken have long been advocated by the DRSEA, and I would like to believe that MLB takes seriously what we are about, as reflected in its actions.

MLB has taken some positive and dramatic steps to address the welfare of prospects, including creating educational opportunities, but, unfortunately, if the media continues to focus on the negative, those opportunities, as well as the activities of the DRSEA, will continue to be ignored and the focus will remain on a one-sided and distorted image of Dominican baseball.

Ligas Mayores Ofrecen Oportunidades Educativas A Los Dominicanos Que Son Agente Libres (Released Dominican Players Offered Educational Opportunity) – Major League Baseball has announced it will provide released Minor League players from the Dominican Republic an opportunity to enroll in educational programs through its new Educational Initiative Program for Latin America.

Major League Baseball signed an agreement to create and support an educational program for Dominican players in partnership with the government of the Dominican Republic. The agreement, which applies to signed players and recently released players who have played for at least one of the 30 club academies after January 2009, is the latest step taken by MLB to expand educational and vocational opportunities for Dominican players.

Rafael Perez, head of MLB's office in the Dominican Republic, called the education initiative, "one of the most important projects of MLB in the DR. We are totally committed to provide opportunities not only to released players to further their education, but we are also working closely with each club to improve their education programs at the academies. We strongly believe a better educated baseball player will have a better opportunity to reach the big leagues."



Rafael Perez

The programs, which range from technical, vocational and entrepreneurial opportunities, to elementary and high school equivalency courses, job-seeking workshops and career-counseling services, are designed to provide players with occupational alternatives after their playing careers are over.

Players released between January 2009 and August 2012 are eligible to participate. The league is currently accepting players into the program, said Josefina Carrion, coordinator of the initiative for Major League Baseball, adding that is already a success. “Our initiative for released players has been well received,” she said, “and we are working to make a positive difference in the lives of those young men.”

Todo Ese Jazz (All That Jazz) – The Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy is developing a jazz heritage project as part of its educational mission.

Both sports and music provide universal languages of communication, uniting people and cultures with common bonds. Jazz is its own form of artistic expression; Dominicans have taken baseball to a new art form through improvisation and unique style – they are the jazz artists of the baseball diamond.

The Dominican Jazz Initiative (DJI) is a collaboration between Jazz en Dominicana and the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy to promote the advancement, creativity, and appreciation of jazz through education and performance activities that harness the talents of jazz musicians to educate and inspire the next generation of performers and listeners.

The DJI recognizes the educational values inherent in jazz; by understanding this unique art form, the next generation comes to understand not only the music’s legacy, but also understand the values it represents.

Jazz en Dominicana, created in 2006, is the brainchild of Fernando Rodriguez, a Dominican who was raised in Long Island, NY, and educated at the University of Houston before returning to his native country after 22 years.



Fernando Rodriguez

He blames the Milt Jackson Quintet's rendition of "*Sunflower*" for giving rise to his passion for jazz. "This production was the 'culprit' that sent me into the depths of the genre that I love and am so passionate about," Rodriguez said. "The first time I heard it, its impact was so great that I repeated it 17 consecutive times and to this day not a week goes by without listening to it – I never tire of diving into the music of this quintet: Milt Jackson, Freddie Hubbard, Billy Cobham, Herbie Hancock and Ron Carter."

Rodriguez calls jazz "a unique musical style that originated in the United States, but has its roots in Africa and merges both African and European music traditions. Years before the integration of social structures such as the work place, education systems, and professional sports teams, the jazz bandstand was an example of tolerance, cooperation, improvisation, and mutual understanding. In addition, jazz provided one of the first forums for freedom of expression and gender empowerment, and is an example of the transformable power of this fundamental human right.

"Today jazz is a universal language spreading over the continents, influencing and being influenced by other kinds of music, evolving as a merging cultural element for supporters all around the world, with no distinction of race, religion, or national origin."

My own love affair with jazz started with the gift of two albums on my 13th birthday; one by Oscar Peterson and the other by Ramsey Lewis. I wore the grooves off the albums as they expanded my horizons, pressing me to listen to Coltrane, Miles, Dizzy, Billy Holiday, Count Basie, the Duke, and other pioneers of the genre.

I love the innovation of jazz, how it stirs my soul; it is music you feel as much as you hear, and can't wait to share with others who understand its profound rapture. It is in that spirit that the Dominican Jazz Initiative is being developed.

The idea for the DJI actually came from the New York Jazz Initiative, which was formed in 2008 to advance the performance, education and creative spirit of jazz. Part of its mission is to develop outreach programs that bring jazz and jazz masters into all levels of music education, as well as to develop cross-curriculum and interdisciplinary programs incorporating jazz technique and history into subjects other than music, including history. It also fosters the application of jazz performance techniques and history to all levels of public and private education.

I have been pleasantly surprised by the existence and sophistication of the jazz community in the Dominican Republic; I was introduced to it by Fernando, who "hosts" jam sessions at various locations in Santo Domingo, including *La Cantina del Agave*, a local restaurant. The musicians he presents are talented in breadth and scope, with many of them educated at top music schools in the United States, yet they fuse their music with a Latin flair that makes it somehow uniquely Dominican.

Jazz has yet to reach the masses in the Dominican Republic who tend to be caught up in *salsa*, *merengue* and *bachata*. I ask friends if they like jazz and far too often the answer is no. But more baffling is that they admit they never listen to it. "How do you know you don't like it if you have never listened to it," I ask?

Through the DJI, I see jazz as an instrument to bring its history, innovation and, of course, its Latin roots to promote the educational values of music, if nothing else the skill of learning to listen, and the critical thinking skills inherent in the creative process.

We are hoping to launch the DJI in early 2013, and are currently recruiting musicians, jazz historians and aficionados of the genre to the cause. If you are interested in supporting the

program, please go to our website, www.drsea.org, to find out how you can make a donation today. The art form of baseball is well developed in the Dominican Republic; the art form of jazz deserves a little attention as well.



*Enjoying some jazz with friends at **La Cantina***

Charles S. Farrell

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