

Cuban Radio at a Crossroads Changing Demographics Shaking Up the Dial

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When her nephew died in a car crash, Aurora Espinosa turned to the institution she knew would help her bury the penniless balsero -- Miami's Cuban radio.

Espinosa called WAQI-Radio Mambi and WQBA-La Cubanisima -- and right away, the morning commentators put the tearful woman on the air. By the day's end, a Hialeah funeral home had donated services, and \$700 was raised for other expenses. Strangers even showed up at the viewing.

"I used to listen to Miami radio from Cuba, so I knew they would help me," said Espinosa, who came from the island a year ago. "But this is beyond anything I ever imagined."

Despite the shrinking of its traditional audience of exiles, Cuban radio is a powerful medium when it comes to mobilizing people, resources, public opinion, votes.

Money is readily raised. Political candidates spend a huge chunk of their campaign funds in radio ads and infomercials that appeal to Cuban pride and culture. Public officials in trouble often go on the airwaves to seek exoneration -- at least before the court of Cuban-exile opinion.

Cuban radio's charismatic commentators are a powerful voice in setting the community agenda and swaying the opinions of a vocal and politically involved sector. In the last two months alone, they've been at the heart of the free-speech debate sparked by the MIDEAM Latin American and Caribbean music conference's interest in including musicians from Cuba, as well as the epicenter of the hotly contested Miami and Hialeah elections. On Saturday, they summoned thousands to a massive march to show exile unity in the fight against Fidel Castro.

But Cuban radio -- fiery and controversial -- is at a crossroads.

The diversification of the Hispanic community has brought about declining ratings for the traditionally powerful AM talk stations. And the political maturing of a Cuban exile community now almost four decades old, and the coming of age of second-generation Cuban Americans, are driving a need for change.

Advertisers want more programming that appeals to the 25- to 53-year-old listener with disposable income to buy their products. Older Cubans, the traditional audience, have less buying power and are slowly dying.

"Rivero and Caballero are our worst enemies," commentator Tomas Garcia-Fuste quipped, referring to the funeral homes.

Changing viewpoints

The older Cubans are being replaced both in the marketplace and in the civic scene by a second generation that is more Americanized and by newer, younger exiles who tend to have a more complex view of Cuba than the traditional commentators espouse.

But what really has rocked Cuban radio -- which dominated the Spanish-language radio market not long ago -- is the increasing presence in Miami-Dade and Broward counties of other Latin Americans who have little interest in Cuba-oriented fare.

Non-Cubans now make up 40 percent of Dade's Hispanics. And the Colombian-owned station Radio Caracol, on WSUA-1260 AM, is having tremendous success capturing the AM Spanish-language audience.

"What this all reflects is the changing face of Miami. It's not 85 percent Cuban anymore," advertising executive Michelle Zubizarreta said. "It is becoming more diverse, more politically varied. Even the new immigrants coming from Cuba don't want to hear exclusively about Cuban politics. They left because they didn't want to hear about Fidel anymore."

To address those concerns and boost their appeal to younger listeners, WQBA has hired consultants and held in-house seminars on the changing marketplace. Some of the proposed changes, however, drew such internal turmoil that two on-air personalities resigned.

Updating audience

In a heated discussion with call-in listeners, commentator and general manager Agustin Acosta denied that changes would "de-Cubanize" La Cubanísima -- "the very Cuban" -- station. WQBA, he said, simply wants to be more inclusive of other Hispanics and appeal to younger Cubans. And it wants to provide more local coverage.

"Radio has been incorporating younger people from what was the prototype of 20 years ago, and the topics now have a lot more to do with lifestyles and issues that affect people here and now," Acosta said in an interview.

In another station, the change was more radical. Two weeks ago, the spot on the dial belonging to WCMQ, a Cuban station named for its Havana predecessor, was sold to One-on-One Sports, a national sports network.

WCMQ moved to a weaker signal at 1750 AM. In the move, the station lost the popular Garcia-Fuste, who signed on with WWFE-La Poderosa (The Powerful One) on 670 AM, from where he broadcasts his show Buenos Días, Miami .

Garcia-Fuste is counting on fans to follow him.

Accessible to all

"Despite our problems, Cuban radio has loyal listeners," said Garcia-Fuste, who now sports a sign in front of his microphone that says, "No pierdas la tabla." Don't lose it.

For the last couple of years, Garcia-Fuste said, he has addressed audience changes by putting people he disagrees with on the air -- people whose views run contrary to the hard line on Castro, once a major taboo on Cuban radio.

"I let them speak, tell their side of the story, then I refute them," Garcia-Fuste said. "That's what my listeners expect of me."

His competition, WAQI-Radio Mambi, remains all-Cuban news and talk and staunchly unchanged. Commentators, including the combative Armando Perez-Roura, harshly criticize any move they see as a deviation of a hard line against Fidel Castro and seldom invite people who disagree with them. They speak of an armed struggle against Castro and dissect the political landscape of the 1950s as if it had all happened yesterday.

"We do represent the hard line of exile, and in the end we are going to win," Garcia-Fuste said, "because when Clinton makes the wrong move, I jump on him, and I take away votes."

Indeed, there are many reasons why Cuban radio cannot be counted out.

One is the loyalty of its listeners -- people like Rosalba Claveria.

A triple listener

Claveria, 65, has three radios tuned to her three favorite stations -- Radio Mambi in the kitchen (she wakes up to Walter Mercado's horoscope); La Poderosa in her sewing room to listen to her favorite talk-show host, Garcia-Fuste; and La Cubanisima in her dining room to catch el doctor Manuel Rico Perez and his medical program in the afternoons.

"The radio keeps me company all day long," said Claveria, a seamstress who works at home in Miami Beach. "I couldn't stand the silence."

Also, Cuban radio has the audience that politicians need -- the voter group that often makes the difference in heavily Hispanic districts. Unlike other Hispanics, who may lack legal voting status, longtime Cubans have become citizens and registered to vote. Unlike other Hispanics who can return home anytime they want to, Cubans have no choice but to stay here, which has led to their heavy involvement in civic life.

In cities like Miami and Hialeah, the voters often mirror the target audience of Cuban radio - older Cubans.

Political necessity

"You could not win an election without Cuban radio," said Hialeah Mayor Raul Martinez, re-elected to his seventh term in November. "It's extremely important, more so than newspapers, more so than TV. Television gives you an image, newspapers give people reading, but radio gives you credibility."

Dario Moreno, a political scientist at Florida International University who recently did a voter analysis in Miami, found that the typical voter in the city is a 63-year-old Cuban woman. Tune in to any "open microphone" show, and that's exactly who's calling in.

"They have pull all over the county, but their main center of power is in Miami and Hialeah, because both have an incredibly elderly Hispanic population," Moreno said.

That's why, although on any given day the all-consuming issue is still Cuba and Castro, Cuban radio has a significant impact on civic life in South Florida.

"Cuban radio played a major role in the empowerment of the Cuban community," Moreno said. "I cannot think of another city in which the Hispanic population had a better mechanism for mobilizing people and getting people excited about political issues."

Negative uses, too

That's the positive side of radio politics. On the negative side, Moreno said, Cuban radio is the medium of choice to play divisive ethnic politics.

"Politicians have been very Machiavellian in using Cuban radio to appeal to just that one segment of the community," Moreno said.

During the recent political season, practically every candidate in Miami and Hialeah elections bought extensive blocks of air time during prime-time programming.

Miami Commissioner Humberto Hernandez had his Cuban mother assuring voters she had a good son and telling them that "what happened to him" -- an indictment on bank fraud and money-laundering charges -- could happen to their own sons or grandsons. Miami Mayor Xavier Suarez and former Mayor Joe Carollo traded insults in their respective Cuban radio ads.

The political season aside, one of the most significant events played out on Cuban radio recently came after singer Gloria Estefan wrote a letter to The Herald in defense of free speech after the removal of Peggi McKinley from Miami-Dade's Film Advisory Board.

Community backlash

Estefan wrote after McKinley's removal for saying musicians from Cuba should be allowed to participate in MIDEM. She urged for tolerance of opposing points of view and respect for the free-speech principles.

Many radio commentators -- and listeners who called -- saw the letter as an affront to the Cuban community, which had been accused of being intolerant for supporting McKinley's removal. In the ensuing call-in shows, Estefan and her husband, Emilio, were portrayed as disloyal, even communists. The talk on the air was that the Estefans were bringing Cuban musicians from the island.

Radio personalities "change things around," Emilio Estefan said. "We have never thought of bringing Cuban musicians from Cuba. We have a long track record of being anti-communists. All Gloria did was defend free speech, because that's what we Cubans stand for, freedom. Can you imagine, even my mother was calling me and asking, 'Is it true, mi hijo, that you're doing business with the Cuban government?' I said, 'Are you crazy?' It was terrible."

Still wield power

There lies much of the influence of Cuban radio -- younger Cuban Americans may not be listening in large numbers, but their parents, their abuelas and abuelos, and aunts and uncles are.

"It hurts," Estefan said. "Not monetarily, but emotionally it hurts. These are our people. This is our community."

Radio watchers, however, point to the statistics and insist that Cuban radio has no choice but to broaden its scope, become more inclusive and, perhaps, even less combative if it

wants to survive. After all, by the next census, Cubans are predicted to make up just 45 percent of the Hispanic community in Dade.

"What you may see in the future is a political radio that takes on a more pan-Hispanic theme, concentrating on the common issues of language, immigration, language-based discrimination and, yes, some involvement in local politics," Moreno said.

That's the approach that seems to have given the winning combination to Radio Caracol -- the new successful kid on the Spanish-language radio block. Barely 4 years old, the station has consistently placed at the top of the ratings charts for the last year.

Caracol commentators cover the gamut of topics -- from domestic abuse to the quality of local schools -- and deal with issues by interviewing experts who deliver more fact than opinion. For international affairs, it relies on a network of correspondents based in all of the major world capitals.

"We have opened the universe to our listeners," said commentator Eucario Bermudez, a veteran Colombian journalist. "We embrace all of the people in Miami -- without picking one community over the other. We started out being Colombian four years ago, but we realized that we had to address the needs of all Latin Americans."

VOICES OF SPANISH-LANGUAGE TALK RADIO

These are some of the most popular personalities on Spanish radio.

WAQI Radio Mambi 710 AM

Armando Perez-Roura , one of the best known on-air personalities, came to Miami in 1969. He is known for the strident delivery of his daily editorial " Tome Nota" (Take Note), which airs several times a day weekdays during the morning and afternoon news shows.

Agustin Tamargo's daily commentary on Cuba "Al Pan Pan y Al Vino Vino " (which loosely translates to Calling a Spade a Spade) airs weekdays during news shows. He always ends with the phrase "Cuba primero, Cuba despues, Cuba siempre" (Cuba first, Cuba later, Cuba always).

Marta Flores is the nightowls' favorite with a spirited talkshow, La Noche y Usted (The Night and You), that runs weekdays from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. She devotes entire programs to encouraging people to protest artists she views as favorable to the Cuban government.

WQBA La Cubanisima 1140 AM

Agustin Acosta is the station's lead news on-air personality and its general manager. "My approach to the airwaves is that I listen to all opinions and I reject those I do not share -- without having to call names or resort to improper language."

Bernadette Pardo , a television reporter for Miami's Channel 23, co-hosts a talk show with Acosta at 9 a.m. weekdays. They discuss the day's top local news and feature a call-in segment with listeners. Acosta calls her "the more liberal of the two."

Ninoska Perez Castellon , a director of the Cuban American National Foundation, hosts the popular Ninoska a la Una show at 1 p.m. weekdays which centers on contemporary Cuban

issues. She is known to call Cuba, pretending to be someone else, and exposing the government's wrongdoings.

WSUA Radio Caracol 1260 AM

Eucario Bermudez is the station's best known personality. A 40-year news veteran, he is well known in Colombia and has worked in South Florida for more than 10 years. He is on the air with news and commentary weekdays from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m.

William Restrepo , also Colombian, has lived in the United States for 25 years. The station's news director, he co-anchors news programming with Bermudez from 6 to 10 a.m. weekdays. From 4 to 7 p.m., he offers a more human interest-styled news show.

CUBAN RADIO 1972: RADIO STATION WFAB ("LA FABULOSA") BECOMES THE FIRST STATION TO BROADCAST SOLELY IN SPANISH. TEXT TO THIS ARTICLE DID NOT REACH THE LIBRARY SYSTEM. FOR FULL TEXT, SEE MICROFILM FOR THIS DATE. WHO'S LISTENING TO WHAT? THESE ARE TOP-RATED RADIO STATIONS AMONG SPANISH-SPEAKING AUDIENCES DURING MORNING RUSH HOUR, FROM 6 A.M. TO 10 A.M. TEXT TO THIS ARTICLE DID NOT REACH THE LIBRARY SYSTEM. FOR FULL TEXT, SEE MICROFILM FOR THIS DATE. CUTLINES: C.W. GRIFFIN / HERALD STAFF COUNTING ON FANS: POPULAR COMMENTATOR TOMAS GARCIA-FUSTE SWITCHED FROM WCMQ TO WWFE-LA PODEROSA (THE POWERFUL ONE). RAUL RUBIERA / HERALD STAFF SUCCESS STORY: WILLIAM RESTREPO IS NEWS DIRECTOR OF RADIO CARACOL, WHICH IS CAPTURING THE AM SPANISH-LANGUAGE AUDIENCE. JON KRAL / HERALD STAFF NEW SOUND: COMMENTATOR AND GENERAL MANAGER AGUSTIN ACOSTA, HERE WITH BERNADETTE PARDO, DENIES THAT CHANGES WILL `DE-CUBANIZE' WQBA.

color photo: Agustin Acosta with Bernadette Pardo (a); photo:

William Restrepo (a), Tomas Garcia-Fuste (a), Eucario Bermudez, William

Restrepo, Armando Perez-Roura, Agustin Tamargo, Marta Flores, Agustin Acosta,

Bernadette Pardo, Ninoska Perez Castellon (8-n)

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