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# Cuban Vintage Car Culture

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# Cuban Vintage Car Culture

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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# Cuban Vintage Car Culture

Zachary H. White

## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the culture surrounding the vintage American cars found in Cuba. Through preliminary research, the researcher determined Cubans are continuing to use these cars as means of transportation as well as a source of income. They have kept the cars maintained by recycling parts from other cars, tractors, and boats, as well as buying new parts from the black market. Once they have been repaired, many owners around major cities use them as taxis. This is so that the owners can afford to maintain them as well as provide additional income for their families. The owners are required to pay the government about \$600 a month to use them as taxis, but if used in Havana or similar sized cities, the owners can expect to make about \$20-\$30 per hour driving tourists.

While in Havana, the researcher conducted observations, identifying many vintage cars and observing their treatment. Additionally, two interviews were conducted of an owner-operator of a 1953 Plymouth and a driver of a government owned 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air.

## Introduction

In 1959, the Cuban government outlawed the private ownership of cars made after that year (Automotive News, 2011). Then in 1962, the American embargo of Cuba was extended to include almost everything (NPR, 2011). One of the biggest items no longer coming into Cuba from the US was new cars or even replacement parts for the cars that were already there. Since then, the only cars coming into Cuba have been from countries like Russia (formerly the USSR), China, South Korea, Italy, and France but due to the restriction on private ownership these new cars are not widely owned in Cuba (George, 2017). The cars that are used the most are the ones from 1959 and prior that the Cuban people still owned and operate (George, 2017). In 2011, the Cuban government lifted the restriction on private ownership of cars but the economy still wasn't suitable for a growth in car sales (NPR, 2011). Additionally, the Cuban people only make about \$20 a month in a decent paying job (George, 2017). For them to save enough money to buy a new car would take way too long. For a Hyundai that averages around \$15,000 in the US, a Cuban Citizen would have to pay upwards of \$40,000 for the same car which makes it extremely cost prohibitive (Miroff, 2011).

Since the owners of the vintage American cars in Cuba weren't buying new cars, they had to maintain the cars that they had. One of the largest obstacles to that is the

U.S. embargo of goods to Cuba. The embargo eliminates any original parts coming from the US so the owners had to get creative with where and how they got parts for their cars. The resourcefulness and ingenuity of the Cuban people shows in the state of their cars is possibly a large part of the culture that has developed around these cars. This aspect of the culture is one of the points this paper aims to discuss and analyze.

One of the other things that is interesting to examine, with regards to the vintage American cars, is the idea of ownership. Cuba has been under a communist regime since 1959 and from then to 2011, private ownership of things such as cars has been illegal. The people who have grown up within this period have never personally owned a car unless it was made prior to 1959. Therefore, the owners of these cars have been some of the only people to own private cars. How ownership has affected the development of a vintage car culture is another aspect this paper aims to assess.

Due to the economy, the government, and the U.S. embargo it is feasible that Cuban owners of vintage American cars have developed a unique culture centered around these cars. This leads to the question: How has the need to maintain '50s era cars affected the development of a "vintage car culture" with respect to resourcefulness and ownership, and how will it change soon with trade reopening between the US and Cuba?

## Background

Under the communistic government of Cuba, the people receive an average of \$20 a month as income (Motor Trend, 2014). This severely limits any large purchases that they can make, such as cars. Even cars from countries like Korea can cost upwards of \$30,000; more than double the price of these cars in the US, which is an unimaginable amount for the majority of Cubans. Only recently in 2011, the Cuban government made it legal for the private selling and owning of cars made after 1959 (NPR, 2011). Before then, cars made before 1959 were passed down through families and maintained as best as they could. Black markets developed for parts so that those with these classic cars had the means to keep them running. Due to the lack of original parts from the US though, many of these cars are considered “Zombies” (2014, Motor Trend). On the outside they look original, but under the hood they are powered by everything from tractor engines to diesel engines from Soviet Era vehicles (2014, Larsen). This unique craft of maintaining these cars with anything available shows the resourcefulness of the Cuban people and how well they’ve managed to flourish under a communistic government and economy.

In and around tourist areas like Havana, many classic cars can be seen rolling through town giving tourists tours through the city in their vintage cars. Tourists are known to pay top dollar for these rides just to experience “Vintage Havana.” The owners of these cars can make a lot of money from these tours which help them maintain these cars year after year. The price of new (to them) engines and hand crafted replacement parts can add up over the years. Additionally, since these owners won’t be able to buy a brand new car anytime soon they have to ensure that their current vehicle will last them, and their families, for years to come.

Classic American cars aren’t the only cars that can be found in Cuba. Kia’s, Toyota’s, Ladas, Moskviches, and Volgas can be found throughout Cuba as well. There is also a small assortment of European cars like 1980s Mercedes. Most of the European and Asian cars are privately owned while the Russian cars seem to be used more often for governmental use like Police and other such entities (George, 2017). This shows that private ownership has taken a strong hold since 2011. Unfortunately, Cubans are still too poor to buy new cars (Chatham, 2014). Even if they sold their vintage American car, they’d still be way short of the cost of a

new car. So instead of selling their car for a large sum of money, they continue to take care of the car they have (2014, Chatham). For most Cubans, how well their car is maintained is a source of pride for them, like it is for many Americans who own cars. It’s a status sign that many people wouldn’t sell for any amount.

## Methodology

The main sources of information from which the culture was studied were observations and interviews done while in Havana and the surrounding areas. Two interviews were done in the course of a week with two gentlemen who drove a vintage car in Havana. Questions asked included:

- What year and model is your car?
- How did you acquire this car?
- Do you own the car personally?
- How have you had to maintain the car?
- Where do you get parts for your car?
- Would you sell your car for a newer one?

An interview was also done with the tour guide to answer broader questions about the system that the government has set up between it and the owners of the cars including regulations and licensing.

The observations were made throughout the week while traveling around Havana as well as Varadero and Viñales. Before arriving in Havana, the researcher hoped to discover some sort of vintage car enthusiast group, but was unable to find one. There have been documented instances of groups like this that put on races and such events that would be great to experience in order to better understand the culture. With more time in the city, the researcher would have been able to devote more time to investigating the existence of these groups and hopefully be able to interact with them.

## Discussion

From observations, vintage American cars are still in use all over Havana and the surrounding areas. The main use for them in the city is as taxis for tourists. Owners of the cars can charge \$20 to \$30 an hour for tours around Havana and there are enough tourists who want the “Vintage Havana” experience to sustain that type of industry (Z. White, Personal Communication, 03/11-18/2017).

The cars themselves are in various states of condition. Some are so well kept that they look brand new with almost all original parts. Apart from the well-maintained,



**Figure 1:** 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air (White, 2017)



**Figure 2:** 1959 Chevrolet Impala (White, 2017)



**Figure 3:** 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air (Vargas, 2017):

there is a large range in the state of condition that these cars are found in. The worst can be seen with missing paint, missing door handles, and in a general state of decay (Z. White, Personal Communication, 03/11-18/2017). Some examples of the well-maintained are shown above. Unfortunately, no photos were taken of the worse off cars.

While in Havana, the researcher conducted two interviews with men who operated their cars as taxis. The first man was in his upper twenties and was given his 1953 Plymouth from his father who inherited the car from his dad. This car had been in the family since it was bought brand new. Cars like his are some of the only things that Cubans could own prior to 2011. To be able to pass the car down from generation to generation is a source of pride for those who own them just like it is for Americans who own vintage cars. The 53 Plymouth was on the lower end of the maintenance curve with barebones interior that looked like it was original due to

the large holes in the upholstery. Nonetheless, the owner took great pride in the car and operated it with practiced skill. When asked about the engine, he stated that it had recently been replaced with a diesel engine due to the old one having failed after many miles had been put on it. It seemed that the engine had been taken from a tractor and fitted to run in the chassis of the car. The owner also mentioned that many of the parts he bought to maintain the car came from either scraped cars around the country that had given up their parts to better others, or they were brought in from the outside. This trend of the use of recycled parts shows how resourceful the Cuban people have become in their desire to maintain their vintage cars. Cubans have learned to use what they have and to alter parts to function how they want them too or how they need them too. This can be seen with the fact that some of the cars in Cuba are operating with tractor or boat engines. The resourcefulness of the Cuban people is a quality for everyone to admire.

The second man drove a 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air, in a much nicer condition than the Plymouth, still was not in exceptional condition. It was missing some interior details and some of the door handles didn't work, but other than that it looked great and you could tell that the owner took good care of it. To the researcher's surprise, the driver stated that he did not own the car. Instead, he worked for the government and merely drove it for them while he personally owned a motorcycle. He stated that the motorcycle was much cheaper and faster to use to get around the city. Although the driver did not own the car, one could see the immense pride he took when speaking about and driving the car. He was more than happy to talk about the car as well as take pictures with it. When asked if he could drive any brand-new car in the world, he responded "a Ford Fairlane. I love old cars!" These vintage cars are engrained in the Cuban culture. Anyone who has grown up there has grown up with these cars and no one wants to see them disappear.

From an interview with the tour guide, Alejandro, the researcher learned that in 2009 and 2010 the Cuban government sold new engines to those who owned a vintage car but needed an engine for about \$5000-\$7500 (Z. White, Personal Communication, 03/18/2017). The engines were usually diesel engines or older Mercedes-Benz engines. In 2010, the government allowed vintage car owners to buy licenses with a monthly fee of \$600 CUC to use their cars as taxis, which has fundamentally changed the way these vintage cars were used (Z. White, Personal Communication, 03/18/2017). The cars undergo testing and inspection before the government allows them to be used. Currently, almost every vintage car that is encountered around Havana, which numbers about 300 cars with a comparable number in other major cities like Santiago de Cuba, is marked as a taxi (Z. White, Personal Communication, 3/18/2017). Additionally, due to the rise in tourism every year in Cuba, taxi drivers and the cars owners can make a relatively large amount of money when compared to their yearly government salary. Therefore, the culture surrounding these vintage American cars in Cuba has centered around their use as taxis for use in the tourism economy. This is supported by the fact that the main reason for using these cars is because of the additional source of income they provide. In the end, it is all a large cycle. The cars are used to make money, the money is used to maintain the cars, the cars draw more tourists to the country, and the money stimulates the Cuban

economy

### **Limitations**

One of the largest limitations that inhibited interviews was the language barrier. The researcher speaks Spanish at a very basic level and understands it slightly better than that. Most Cubans speak some English but in the two interviews completed, the interviewee spoke as much English as the researcher spoke Spanish. This made the more complex questions difficult to communicate. Fortunately, a mix of Spanish and English was enough to complete the interview.

The other large limitation to research was limited time available as ordered by the Cuban government. In order to receive a visa to enter Cuba, every person must have an itinerary filed with the government. The tour companies are also required to stick to that schedule, and to make sure the groups do as well. The researcher had on average two or three hours of free time in the afternoons to conduct data collection. Before we had to meet again to go to dinner.

### **Conclusion**

Like all other countries of the world, Cuba is full of unique cultures, including those surrounding cars. Cuba does have one thing that most countries don't and that is 1950s era American cars. During our trip to Havana and a couple other areas nearby, the researcher hoped to be able to study the culture that has developed specifically around these types of cars to find out how has the need to maintain these vintage cars affected the development of a culture surrounding them?

Through observations, interviews and prior research it has been found that the main culture surrounding these cars is that of a taxi culture. Due to the state of the Cuban economy and government, it is highly beneficial economically for those Cubans who own vintage American cars to use them as taxis around high tourism areas like old Havana and other major metropolitan areas. Additionally, since Cubans only receive around \$300 per year as their government income, they do not have a disposable income in order to really invest in their car other than to maintain it at a working condition.

To continue and improve upon this research, more interviews with a broader base would be needed. This trip was limited to mainly Havana but these vintage cars can be found all over the island. In order to study the culture better, interviews and observations would have to be done in multiple cities and rural areas. While the

vintage car culture in the cities may be that of a taxi culture, in areas where there is less tourism the culture could potentially be extremely different.

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