



The glamour of showbiz: Jonathan Blue with Cuban showgirls

Photo courtesy of Jonathan Blue

CUBA'S GOT TALENT

A U.S. talent agency hopes to become the first American company to recruit Cubans on a 'large scale' in decades

By Suzette Laboy

Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean, is ripe with the talented artists Jonathan Blue is looking for.

"For that many people with that education level and literacy rate, we think it will be a hotbed for talent," said Blue, head of Louisville, Ky.-based talent company Blue Entertainment Sports Television—or BEST—which represents talent from athletes to media personalities. Among its clients: Defensive tackle Lawrence Guy of the New England Patriots, CNN sports anchor Andy Scholes, and Clayton Morris of Fox News.

Now, the company that represents close to 250 U.S. clients wants to focus on talent in Cuba, from media personalities to musicians. "There's wonderful people down there," says Blue. "Very talented and creative people, despite the years of turmoil."

Blue, who is also chairman and managing director of investment firm Blue Equity, recently signed a contract to find talent on the island with Pedro Rodriguez,

a Cuban entrepreneur licensed by the Cuban government. Approval is pending on the U.S. side from the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, which enforces economic and trade sanctions.

Once approved, it could mark the first time an American company has partnered with Cuba to recruit talent since the Cuban revolution in 1959. "We are hoping to bring talent to the U.S. as well as to bring U.S. talent to Cuba, which isn't being done on a large scale," Blue said.

Cuban entertainers, artists, and athletes can already travel to the U.S. with a special visa. What makes this deal unique is that it brings the "formalized structure of a recruiting firm," said Andrew Otazo, executive director of the Cuba Study Group, a nonprofit that focuses on entrepreneurship and other issues in Cuba. "To my knowledge, there's no other U.S. recruiting firm looking for that type of talent in Cuba."

Blue will also be riding a global wave of fascination for all things Cuban. "When I travel, I see Cuban stuff all over the place, from London to New York," said Leslie Pantin, a Miami advertising and public relations executive who produces the annual three-day Cuba Nostalgia show. "It's a bar, it's a nightclub, it's music, it's art, everywhere," he says. "This [entertainment] would reach a receptive audience."

Also an avid Cuban art collector, Blue has been traveling to Cuba for years and hoped to expand his business there after President Obama announced plans to improve relations with the island in 2014. Bilateral ties still operate under rules set in motion by the Obama administration, which allows U.S. businesses to import some goods and services from private entrepreneurs and for Americans to travel to Cuba. If President Donald Trump decides to revoke these policies, that could change the equation for Blue.

In the meantime, Blue and his partners are "actively looking" for talent as they wait for U.S. approval, expected this year. "It's not an industry down there," he says. "We are trying to be pioneers and hopefully it will bode well for us and them." ★

