

“Los Frikis” Film Tells of Cuban Punk Rockers in the '90s Who Gave Themselves HIV

Cuba quarantined people with HIV in sanatoriums. As *Los Frikis* shows, such a life afforded some people freedom they couldn't find elsewhere. [VIDEOS]

December 24, 2024 By [Trent Straube](#)

Among the lion kings, wicked witches and gladiators at your local movie house this holiday season, you'll find an unexpected [HIV story](#): *Los Frikis*.

Inspired by true events, [the film](#) *Los Frikis* “follows the raw, unforgettable story of a group of punk rockers in 1990s [Cuba](#) (known as the Frikis, or freaks) who injected themselves with HIV-positive blood to gain refuge in government-run sanatoriums,” explains a movie promo. “There, in a world meant for isolation, they carve out their own anarchic utopia—an oasis of rock 'n' roll, joy and independence. *Los Frikis* is a powerful coming-of-age tale about the price of freedom and the lengths we go to find it.”



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A post shared by Los Frikis (@losfrikis.movie)

Under the strict rule of Fidel Castro and after the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba experienced a severe depression, known as the Special Period, which left residents desperate for food, shelter, clothing and basic freedoms. For example, Castro criminalized rock 'n' roll music, which was deemed American. In the early '90s, many Cubans felt that their best chance at freedom was either to board a makeshift raft bound for the United States or to contract HIV and be sent to a sanatorium, which provided food and the freedom to play and listen to rock music.

Seven years ago, Vice spoke with several remaining members of the Frikis for an article and related video. Watch a segment below and [on YouTube](#):

In a related Vice article "[Why a Community of Punks Chose to Infect Themselves With HIV in Castro's Cuba](#)," Niurka Fuentes explains why her husband, a Friki named Papo La Bala (Papo the Bullet), made such a choice. "He knew that by infecting himself he would be sent to the sanitarium," she recalls. "He knew that he would meet other people like him in there, the police would leave him alone and he would be able to live his life in peace."

"You could hear rock 'n' roll and heavy metal coming from every house," Yoandra Cardoso, a longtime Friki adds. "When the sanatorium first opened, it was 100% Frikis...we were all here together."



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The Spanish-language film is by Michael Schwartz and Tyler Nilson, the writing/directing duo behind 2019's *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (watch an interview with them above). [In a Reddit Ask Me Anything forum](#), Schwartz explained how they remained faithful to the true stories of the Frikis:

"To make *Los Frikis* we felt we had to work with the right collaborators, so we started by approaching Phil Lord and Chris Miller (the duo behind the *Spider-Verse* movies). Not only are their storytelling instincts top tier, but Phil is Cuban American. He connected us to so many Cuban artists, directors, writers, and actors that started to form the brain trust looking out to do *Los Frikis* the right way.

"Perhaps the biggest piece was working with producer and actress Adria Arjona to cast 25 actors from Cuba to fill the cast with people that knew the Cuban culture and history because they grew up with it.

"All that and listening to the people that knew the story better than us. Everyone was invited to tell us at any point if we were getting anything wrong."

"The thing that we were trying to do was make sure that it wasn't sensationalizing (people injecting themselves with HIV) and presenting what was happening in a matter of fact, letting the story tell you what was going on without trying to push it," producer [Miller told TODAY.com](#). "Because what really happened is so outrageous, you don't need to do anything extra to make it seem outrageous. So it was really about trying to underplay it as much as possible."

As POZ has reported, starting in 1986, Cuba implemented the controversial policy of quarantining people living with HIV in sanatoriums, starting with *Los Cocos*, named for its towering coconut palm trees. Eventually, 14 such facilities were scattered across the island. Despite—or perhaps because of—its controversial HIV policies, Cuba successfully stemmed the spread of HIV, compared with other nations. For more in POZ, see "[Keeping AIDS at Bay in Cuba](#)," "[Cuba Is First Nation to Stop Mother-to-Child HIV Transmission](#)" and "[Waking in Havana: A Memoir About AIDS in Cuba](#)."