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By Brooks Robards

The career of legendary Red Sox pitcher Luis Tiant comes alive again in Jonathan Hock's new documentary, "The Lost Son of Havana," part of Martha's Vineyard Film Festival's Summer Series, playing Wednesday, July 8, at the Chilmark Community Center.

Along with producer Kris Meyer, executive producers Bob and Peter Farrelly, Vineyard summer residents, will field questions after the 8 pm screening.

Those of us who saw Tiant play remember his unique wind-up, and the bulldog determination that almost won Boston the 1975 World Series. El Tiant, who still coaches for the Red Sox, tossed an incredible 173 pitches to win the fourth game before the team finally lost.

Tiant left his native Cuba in 1961 at the age of 20 to play in Mexico. Already named 1960 Rookie of the Year in Cuba, the pitcher was drafted by the Cleveland Indians. Forty-six years passed before he could set foot in Cuba again.

The film captures Tiant's return - including visits with relatives, friends and fans - when he is invited to coach a goodwill exhibition game between Americans and Cubans. (Americans are still not legally allowed to visit.) There is a comic bureaucratic twist when the Cuban government requires even the camera crew to play in the game.

"The Lost Son of Havana" intercuts footage of Tiant's Major League career with scenes of the exhibition game in Pinar del Rio and his rambles through the old neighborhoods where he grew up. Until the audience gets reacquainted with the 67-year-old former pitcher, the shots of his earlier career seem a lot more compelling than his low-key return to Cuba.

Commentary from baseball greats like Carlton Fisk and Carl Yastrzemski attest to how Tiant was the hottest pitcher in baseball in his time. He set an Earned Run Average record of 1.60 in 1968 when he went 21-9 wins with 9 shutouts.

At spring training in 1970 when Tiant was playing for the Minnesota Twins, he injured his shoulder. In typical style, he posted seven victories before doctors determined he had cracked his scapula. No record of such an injury existed, except in javelin throwers, and it was a measure of how hard Tiant threw the ball at the height of his career.

Released by the Twins, Tiant was determined to make a comeback and pitched for the Louisville Colonels, a Red Sox farm team. Since Tiant could no longer rely on his fastball, he changed his pitching style and re-invented the style of his father, Luis "Lefty" Tiant, who was a legend in his own time. Playing in the Negro League in the U.S. in 1931, he once struck out Babe Ruth and was rumored to have invented the screwball. Like father, like son.

It didn't take long for the Red Sox to bring up the younger Tiant, who played for them from 1971 to 1978. Actor Chris Cooper narrates how George McGovern intervened on El Tiant's behalf so that his parents could come to the U.S. and watch their only child play during the 1975 season. Senator McGovern describes how Fidel Castro made a rare exception to government policy and allowed the senior Tiants to travel to Boston and stay as long as they liked.

Indeed they stayed for 15 months and might have stayed longer. But the senior Tiant died of cancer and his wife soon followed.

When the Red Sox did not renew Tiant's contract, he moved on to play for the Yankees, the Portland Beavers, the Pittsburgh Pirates and finally the California Angels. "I never gave up," he says.

As his remarkable story unfolds, the film builds rapport with the pitcher's family, friends and former colleagues in Cuba. The grim economics of living in Cuba become clear when one family member admits, "We're living on cigarettes."

A modest hero, Tiant, offers nonn prescription medicine, toothpaste, and cash. "This is my country," he says. "I don't care about politics. If I die, I die happy."

"The Lost Son of Havana," Wednesday, July 8, 8 pm, Chilmark Community Center, South Road, Chilmark. Preceded from 5 to 7 pm by Cinema Circus for children. Tickets, \$12 for adults, \$5 for children (\$6 for MVFF members).

Brooks Robards writes on film, book and art for The Times.