

Jazzismo Libre

The John Reid Quartet plays Havana

by George Melnyk



John Reid (far right) playing with a Cuban folk band.

On the flight to Cuba, where I was heading to see Calgary saxophonist John Reid play in the 20th International Havana Jazz Festival, was Hannah Stilwell, the co-founder of Calgary's Decidedly Jazz Danceworks company. Stilwell is married to Cuban percussionist and singer Israel "Toto" Berriel and visits the country regularly. This time she was in Cuba for a week to solidify a project that she wants to perform at the next Havana Jazz Festival—a dance fusion using Cuban jazz and a mix of Cuban and Canadian performers. "For me, Cuba is an artistic heaven," she beamed. "Cuban dancers astound me with the depth of their performances."

The Cuban artistic spirit has also impressed John Reid. This was his third time in the country within a year: he traveled with the University

of Alberta Academy Strings when they did a tour in February 2002; last summer, he chose Cuba for his honeymoon; and now he and the other members of his quartet—percussionist Greg Baker, bassist Kodi Hutchinson and pianist Dave Klinger—are here as invited guests to the festival.

Among the jazz luminaries playing the festival were Americans Roy Hargrove, Ronnie Mathews, Taj Mahal, Kenny Barron and Regina Carter, who all joined the renowned Cuban pianist Chucho Valdés and his accomplished compadres in nightly extravaganzas of jazzismo. Jane Bunnett and the Spirit of Havana and trumpeter Nick "The Brownman" Ali were the other Canadian musicians. For the John Reid Quartet, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to jam with international jazz greats.

For Reid, it's all about cross-pollinating Canadian and Cuban jazz. "I've been teaching a course in jazz history at the University of Calgary called 'The African Effect on Music,' and I want to develop a new course...that would feature Cuban music," he said when I spoke with the group in the Varadero airport at the end of the festival. The salsa-influenced version of jazz that developed in Cuba has different polyrhythms from traditional jazz. For those accustomed to a more soulful North American sound, the frenzied loudness of Cuban jazz feels very Latino.

The Quartet's first gig was Canada Night at Havana's prestigious Jazz Café. In a mist of cigar smoke, servers in black tuxedos plied high-alcohol cuba libres (rum and coke with lime) and mojitos (rum, soda, lime juice and fresh

mint leaves) while a swarm of amateur photographers lined up at the stage, snapping photos and videotaping the performance—a practice forbidden in Canada and the U.S. While jamming with Cuban star El Greco on trumpet, the quartet entertained with Canadian classic “Swingin’ Shepherd Blues” and John Reid’s own arrangement of “Prince’s Island.”

“When we started to play at the Jazz Café,” Reid said, “it felt like Hollywood, with cameras flashing. It was very exciting.” Later in the week, the quartet attended a reception at the Canadian Embassy (where they were photographed with Fidel Castro’s older brother, Ramon) and played a concluding concert at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes.

The festival concerts weren’t the only places to hear live music in Havana. The streets of the city, especially in the tourist areas, are filled with bands pumping out folklorico and peddling homemade CDs (average price: \$10 U.S.). These bands play together a lot, so they are usually quite good. One group, for example, plays at the upscale Hotel Nacional from noon to midnight every Saturday and Sunday, for a total of 24 hours a week. The bands are not paid for these gigs (and none of the foreign performers at the festival were paid), but the tips are in American dollars, the hottest currency in Cuba.

Because Cuba is a Third World country, its cultural institutions often lack essential equipment. Greg Baker decided to donate his matched drum set to the National Academy of Music. When he presented the set to the school, he learned it would be the school’s first matched drum set. In fact, the director informed him that the academy had been considering closing down the percussion program due to the lack of equipment.

The poor economy in Cuba also means the record-label hype that swamps the jazz world in North America and Europe is non-existent.

Grassroots musical expression, not commercialism, is the norm. “It’s amazing how uncommercial their world is musically,” Kodi Hutchinson remarked. “The players here love to hear music beyond the Cuban sound.” Baker described the whole experience as “a wonderful musical education,” because the musicians are so devoted to their craft.

Sitting in the icy air conditioning of the palatial Teatro Karl Marx, enjoying the festival’s closing ceremonies, I closed my eyes and played

back the world of smoky Ladas, unlit and potholed streets, ramshackle residences and warm, moist air that is the tropical glue of Havana. Unlike the beach-soaked world of regular tourism, a week in this crowded city, fending off phony cigar sellers and speeding in dilapidated cabs from venue to venue, was a curious delight and, like a Cuban cigar, an acquired taste.

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