

glowing, those for the Ballet Nacional's version of *Don Quixote*, choreographed by company founder Alicia Alonso in 1988, were less so. The preserved-in-aspic quality of the Buena Vista Social Club isn't quite as attractive when presented in classical ballet.

"When the Ballet Nacional first returned to the UK everyone was like, 'Wow, isn't it great?'" Wood says. "The second time round [last year] reviewers judged the work at an international level. They pointed out that, actually, the sets were clunky and the costumes dowdy, that the dancers are working in a way that nobody else is any more. So while Cuba's isolation has in many ways been good for its creativity" — male dancers command the same respect as football stars, and dance with the same sinewy flair — "it is also holding it back."

The Cuban music that tours the world is probably less representative than its dance. "Only the established bands get to tour," Gonzalez says. "But there are a lot of new genres evolving. Street poets and rappers are mixing spoken word with Afro-Cuban jazz. Reggaeton is merging with timba [a more musically complex version of salsa]." Tourist haunts resound with Buena Vista-style music — ironically, the BVSC phenomenon bypassed Cuba — and straight-up salsa: "A lot of this other scene is underground."

So what Cuban acts are Australians missing out on, then? Perhaps Los Aldeanos, the incendiary cult rap duo that manages to get away with singing lines such as "People would rather die for the American dream/ than live through this Cuban nightmare"?

A pause. "A Cuban opera," Gonzalez says. "A Cuban opera based on the history of my generation with all its frustrations and successes, and featuring a symphonic orchestra. Cuban symphonic music is wonderful but almost unknown worldwide. I'm working on it."

Gonzalez, Acosta and Cespedes are in the privileged position of being able to come and go from their birthplace and have forged international reputations as a result. For others it isn't so easy; five members of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba defected in Canada after the company performed there in March. ("I worry about them [defectors]," 89-year-old Alicia Alonso told me last year. "They are like kites with their strings cut.")

For the dancers and musicians who leave Cuba for Miami, say, or London or Sydney, usually by marrying a Westerner (there are ex-members of *Lady Salsa* and *Havana Rakatan* dotted across the world, including in Australia), the options are limited. Many end up dancing in nightclubs, playing in local bands or teaching salsa.

Not that the demand isn't there. Cuban salsa classes in Australia proliferate everywhere from Cairns to Canberra, Marrickville to Mooroolbark. There are Latin festivals in Adelaide, Melbourne, Byron Bay. Bands such as Sonora Galaxia from Sydney, Havana Connection in Melbourne and the Canberra-based Mi Tierra are employing Cuban dance rhythms.

There are Cuba-themed bars and restaurants. The Rochford Winery in Victoria's Yarra Valley hosts an annual Cuban jazz



Eliades Ochoa, on guitar, performing at the Casa de la Trova, is one of Cuba's many musical drawcards for tourists

AFP

festival. A combination of these factors has seen Australian producer Mark Brady and Australian choreographer Aaron Cash team up with Cuban choreographer Roclan Gonzalez — the man behind, as it were, *Lady Salsa* — for *Ballet Revolucion*. Auditions in Havana earlier this year cherry-picked a 16-strong cast from hundreds of talented dancers, most of whom were previously members of respected companies including Danza Contemporanea de Cuba and Ballet Nacional de Cuba.

A sort of Cuban-flavoured version of *Rock the Ballet*, the unashamedly commercial *Ballet Revolucion* promises to showcase Cuba's classical and contemporary dance forms, and to get its audience dancing and swaying along. Musical numbers played by an eight-piece live band include *Hips Don't Lie* by Shakira, *Livin' La Vida Loca* by Ricky Martin and, naturally, *Chan Chan*.

The Buena Vista Social Club has a lot to answer for. Back in Santiago de Cuba, gig over, Ochoa sticks around to sign autographs and have his photo taken with smiling tourists. "We love Cuba," they tell him. "We love Cuban music."

As if on cue, an ensemble on the street outside strikes up the familiar four chords of the song that has become the Buena Vista calling card. "The feelings I have for you/ I cannot deny," the singer sings, as the tour group rushes to the balcony.

Ochoa sighs, nods. "Si," he says, eyes twinkling. "Everybody loves Cuban music."

Havana Rakatan, Sydney until June 19.
Ballet Revolucion opens in Perth on July 1, then tours to Sydney, Adelaide, Melbourne and Brisbane.
The Bar at Buena Vista, Tweed Heads, June 17; Brisbane, June 18; Perth, June 21.

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