

ROBERTO Fonseca would rather be in Havana, playing his baby grand in an airy room with open windows and a view of mango trees, than sitting in a hotel next to Paris Orly airport in midwinter. But such is the life of a touring musician — and the pianist, 38, isn't complaining.

"I am doing what I love," he says in heavily accented English, wrapping his hands — clad in navy fingerless gloves — around a coffee cup. "Playing music and sharing it. Taking risks and breaking boundaries. Searching for my own way."

The French, who adore this talented Cubano and his elegant yet streetwise brand of fusion, are right there with him. Every date on Fonseca's national tour has sold out. This was always a given in cities such as Angers and Paris, where Fonseca guest-programmed four nights of music at well-known jazz club Duc des Lombards, including his first ever solo recital without his longtime band: "The stage set was a sofa and a fridge. *Mi casa es su casa* ('My home is your home')."

Venues in provincial towns like Belfort on the Swiss border and Seignosse down on the coast near Spain have enjoyed full houses, too: "Roberto is big in France," says Fonseca's jovial tour manager Javier Moreno. "Especially with the ladies," he adds, ribbing him about his pin-up status.

Fonseca flashes a smile, bats the quip away. "I never believe the hype," he says. "The moment you start thinking that you're the greatest, you go down. But when people tell me that my music makes them feel something they've never felt before . . ." A pause. "That is beautiful . . ."

He admits his profile in France has been enhanced by his self-appointed stylist, the Parisian designer Agnes B, whose leather Byblos hats and sharp shirts and suits — along with the colourful bracelets of his Afro-Cuban Santeria religion — have long been Fonseca's sartorial trademark.

"I'm not wearing her stuff today." He glances down at his grey cardigan, woollen scarf, baggy jeans and trainers. "But I do most of the time."

But his music, of course, is the thing. An inventive blend of jazz, soul, funk, classical music and the Cuban and Afro-Cuban rhythms of his country, it's a sound as intimate and melodic as it is bold, muscular and constantly evolving. After a string of solo albums and collaborations with the likes of British DJ and producer Gilles Peterson, Fonseca embarked on a new phase of his career with his current recording *Yo* (that's 'I' in Spanish), on whose cover he appears bare-chested, vulnerable and, well, remarkably buff.

Featuring traditional West African instruments and sampled vocals from hip-hop MC Mike Ladd and Malian star Fatoumata Diawara, *Yo* sets out to trace Cuba's African roots



Roberto Fonseca

JAZZ IN A LATIN KEY

Pianist Roberto Fonseca, with his elegant fusion style, is seen as the future of Cuban music, writes **Jane Cornwell**

by matching tradition with experiment and including themes from across the world. Considered by many to be his masterwork, *Yo* has been nominated for a Grammy alongside albums by contenders including Spanish singer Buika — who, like Fonseca, will be performing at WOMADelaide in March.

"My goal is to become a reference point," Fonseca told me in 2007, when we met in the

foyer of a swanky tourist hotel in Havana. "Wherever people are, whatever country they are in, I want them to hear my music and say, 'Ah, this is Roberto Fonseca!'"

Fonseca had already come to international attention after taking over the piano chair from Ruben Gonzalez (who died in 2003) in the Buena Vista Social Club, and then touring the world with impish BVSC crooner Ibrahim

Ferrer. Back then he was keen to prove himself as a composer and performer in his own right — and had just completed *Zamazu*, an album with guts and promise.

A graduate of the prestigious Instituto Superior de Arte, Fonseca had been regarded as the future of Cuban music ever since his live solo debut at Havana's Jazz Plaza Festival, aged 15. His weekly gigs at local jazz club La Zorra y el Cuervo (The Fox and the Crow) were the stuff of legend, with Fonseca wielding the keys with his eyes shut and head tipped back, his fingers kneading the keys in the percussive style that hints at his formative years as a drummer.

Yet the hotel's security would nonetheless bar him from entering a lift and joining me in the less noisy hotel restaurant, simply because he is Afro-Cuban.

Fonseca grimaces at the memory, agreeing racism in Cuba is more ingrained than most people think. "But many things have changed in my country since then," he says brightly. "Now we can own small businesses. More of us can come and go. But I don't know about politics," he adds, eyes twinkling, "just because I am Cuban. Remember, I am a piano player, not a politician."

He recalls the press conferences he attended with the Buena Vista Social Club, when journalists from Asia to South America would quiz the elderly maestros on human rights, the US embargo and other political hot potatoes they didn't feel qualified to talk about. Even now, wherever he tours — he last visited Australia in 2009 — he is forced to field







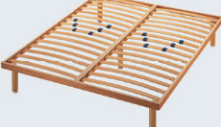

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