

Four decades of Cuban musicality

Los Van Van's tunes have tapped into the island's rhythm

JANE CORNWELL

AT the Karl Marx Theatre in downtown Havana, 5000 vanvaneros are dancing as if on castors. "Ahi na' ma", that's it! they yell as they swivel. Keeping things moving is a 16-piece band on, among other instruments, flutes, violins, keyboards, trombones and percussion, as the four singers — a curly-haired woman, two men in singlets and flat caps and a dreadlocked *hombre* in mirror glasses — belt out hit after hit.

Once Cuba's most famous orchestra gets going, everybody gets going.

Los Van Van (the Go Gos) is an institution in this beleaguered, beautiful Caribbean island. The band's music blares from the windows of shops, buses and most homes with a sound system; their songs are sung across generations, by all of Cuba's mix of races.

Forget the Buena Vista Social Club, those internationally acclaimed oldsters that not many in Cuba listened to anyway.

Los Van Van is the greatest Cuban dance band of the modern era. What the Wallers are to Jamaica or the Beatles were to Britain, so Van Van is to Cuba.

By consistently adapting its style to the times, it's kept wowing audiences at home and abroad for a remarkable four decades.

In a country with a state-controlled press Los Van Van's playful and sometimes risqué lyrics function as social commentary. The stories the songs tell — about overcrowding in Havana, say, or the importance of the Afro-Cuban Santería religion, or witty ripostes to rumours about the band's main players — run across several albums.

The words have worked their way into common parlance, tapping into the Cuban ability to condense big issues into concise phrases with multiple layers of meaning. *Eso que anda* (What's Going On), the title of a 1980s Van Van hit, is now street slang. Even the band's name has become shorthand for excellence. You like it? "Sí," people say, "Es van van."

This anniversary concert celebrates the band's formation in 1969, ten years after Fidel Castro's revolution.

"I never thought we would get this far," says bassist and founder Juan Formell after the show. "Our goal was simply to make music for everyone to enjoy."

"You start off doing what you have to do," he adds in his nasal Cuban Spanish, "and as time passes you realise that you're writing part of the musical history of your country."

The bald, bespectacled Formell, 68, has becoming an increas-



One of the keys to Los Van Van's longevity is the band's ability to embrace new styles; its sometimes risqué lyrics also function as social commentary in Cuba

'You realise that you're writing part of the musical history of your country'

JUAN FORMELL

ingly peripheral figure in Van Van. Having helmed the band on its frequent visits to Europe, Japan and Latin America and its often controversial concerts in the US — in 1999, thousands of anti-Castro Cuban exiles picketed a packed Miami Arena with placards declaring Van Van "bandits" and "communist beggars" — Formell has become picky about when and where he performs. Noticeable by his absence on Van Van's most recent annual visit to London (where the leadership baton was wielded by his percussionist son, Samuel), he will be accompanying the band on its coming tour of Australia, where Los Van Van performed for the first time in 2006.

"The Australian audiences were very receptive," says Samuel Formell of Los Van Van's critically acclaimed concerts in Sydney and Melbourne, where various band members enjoyed a post-show jam with local musicians at inner-city club the Night Cat.

"They really love salsa so we connected with them quickly. Our music is for dancing and that is what they did, from the first song to the last."

Known affectionately in Cuba as Saint Juan, Juan Formell is a major presence here at the Karl Marx Theatre, alternately plucking his double bass and sharing lead vocals in a vibrant set that cherry-picks from more than 30 albums' worth of hits.

There are early songs such as the Latin funk-meets-pop track *Chirrun Chirran* and the 1980s smash *Disco Azucar*; songs from 2000's Grammy-winning record *Llego Van Van* (Here is Van Van) and the current acclaimed *Arasando* (a word that means to demolish the bad). All compelling.

All eminently danceable. "I never miss a chance to play in Cuba," says the Havana-born Formell. "As soon as I get back from being abroad, I hit the street and find out what is going on. Cuba and its people have always been my source of inspiration. I consider myself a storyteller."

And an innovator? He smiles. "Times change very quickly in music. It is too easy to get left behind. If you don't renew yourself, you die."

The Van Van were mavericks from the start. Before the band's formation, Formell was musical director of a French-Haitian influenced *charanga* orchestra, whose line-up of flute, clarinets, piano and other instruments he modernised with the addition of trombones and vocals, synthesisers and drum machines.

This was 1969; the Beatles were dominating the airwaves in most places, except Cuba.

There the revolutionary government was attempting to cut its economic ties with the Soviet

Union by producing an impossible 10 million tons of sugar. "*Los diez millones de que van ... van*" (The ten million must go ... go), ran the ubiquitous slogan — which Formell duly appropriated as the name for his band.

Aided by legendary pianist Cesar "Pupy" Pedros and flamboyant vocalist Pedro Calvo (both of whom left to form their own groups in 2002), the Beatles-loving Formell circumvented Cuba's ban on Western rock music by fusing the national music, son, with funk, jazz and pop in a cheesy fusion he christened *songo* ("It was a total revolution," he says).

Though Van Van kept abreast of international trends it wasn't until the "special period" of the 1990s — when the collapse of the Soviet Union forced Castro to allow tourism, which increased the nation's exposure to foreign culture — that the band pioneered the musically complicated *timba* genre (another branch of son, like salsa), which it is famous for.

To make the band sound a little

more edgy, a little less smooth, Formell pilfered curly-haired singer Yeni Valdes, the band's first female member, from rival outfit NG La Banda.

He got the dreadlocked Mayito rapping as well as singing and the flat-cap-wearing Robertson and Lele Rosales adding the raw edge of the Havana *barrio*.

He kept Los Van Van identifiable by maintaining the group's rhythmic base, and ensured that the quality of the band's music has never varied.

Not that it would; this, after all, is Cuba, where musicality is highly regarded and most musicians are conservatoire-trained; where every musician is a soloist; where if you pick up a rock, people say, you'll find a musician underneath.

So what if Van Van's live shows sometimes seem like the band's on autopilot, cruising along on a greatest hits package? Its members' knack for working a crowd means they never disappoint.

A 3500-strong concert in Miami last January took place without

protest. "Los Van Van rocks downtown Miami," trumpeted the *Miami Herald*. "Miami isn't as aggressive as it was," says Formell. "There's a new, younger generation that thinks differently."

The crowd at the Karl Marx goes crazy when Mayito launches into the hit *Soy Todo*, a Cuban flag draped around his shoulders. The dancers spin and blur.

"The dancers are our barometer," says Formell, when asked to explain the band's longevity. "I try and write music that anticipates changing dance styles. If we're not away, then we play at least once a week in Cuba, so we see how the public reacts."

"Sometimes a new musical idea takes a few years to be accepted, so we have to be patient."

He smiles. "Which is OK," he says. "We have until the future."

Los Van Van will be performing at the Arts Centre, Melbourne, August 11; Queensland Performing Arts Centre, August 13; Sydney Opera House, August 15.

Lawyer succumbed to the siren call of music

OBITUARY

Ken Tribe
Lawyer and arts administrator. Born Sydney, February 6, 1914. Died Sydney, July 16, age 96.



Ken Tribe

PETER Sculthorpe says they don't make men like Ken Tribe any more. "Australian music would be much the poorer if he hadn't existed," the composer says.

It's difficult to find any aspect of Australian classical music that Tribe, who died of pneumonia in Sydney last Friday at 96, wasn't involved in: voluntarily, and with vision, passion and indefatigability.

Last December marked his 60th anniversary with Musica Viva, which he was instrumental in shifting from a Sydney-based support company for a single ensemble to a nationwide presenter of chamber music. He was, for some time, chairman of the Australia Council's music board, and was behind moves to support composers through the Australian Music Centre.

He commissioned several compositions, was involved with the Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition, helped create resident ensembles in universities and was a mentor to the Goldner Quartet.

He chaired the 1984 inquiry into Australian symphony orchestras, concluding that they suffered from being under the ABC, and recommended they be divested to local control. It took more than a decade before his recommendations started to be implemented.

Musica Viva's chief executive, Mary Jo Capps, says Tribe was forward-looking, practical, charming and persistent, with "a keen mind coupled with this incredible sensitivity towards the artistic outcome".

He often came in as a troubleshooter in difficult situations.

"He was unafraid in the very best way," Capps says, "not because he was ignoring the scary bit. Ultimately he felt convinced in the basic goodness of people and that eventually rationality and passion would win out."

Foxtel chief Kim Williams, who worked with Tribe at Musica Viva and the Australia Council, says "he always had the capacity to roll up his sleeves and do the work personally

ive double stop, according to Sculthorpe.

Tribe finished high school at Shore before studying law at the University of Sydney and working as a lawyer for a number of years.

In the early 1950s he took a couple of years out to work in his brother-in-law's hardware store in the Lane Cove shopping centre, and gave legal advice in his spare time, particularly to wartime immigrants from eastern Europe.

One of those, Ervin Graf, was starting a company, Stocks & Holdings, to which Tribe, who had set up his own practice, provided property development advice and conveyancing. He continued a long association with the company, which was to become Stockland.

He had an enormous capacity for friendship and was a man who, from all accounts, had no enemies. He was a great conversationalist and was, Capps says, "unfettered by history and excited by the possibilities of now".

His granddaughter Kate wrote in 2008 of his interest in knowing about the Blackberry and Facebook. Woodworking was a long-term hobby and "you knew you'd been doing well", Williams says, "if you were given one of his lovely wooden bowls or little boxes".

Tribe's eldest son Graham says he was "really someone who believed in moderation in all things except marriage".

He was married three times; first to Alice Dewar Dey, from 1941 to 1952, with whom he had three children; then to Nancy Allen until 1964, with whom he had a daughter.

He was with his third wife, Joan Brown, from 1964 until she died in May this year.

Tribe stopped going to the office daily when he was about 85, but continued to give legal advice until earlier this year.

His involvement in the musical world continued until the end; quite recently he had seen the 2011 program for Musica Viva and decided which concert he particularly wanted to be associated with.

Tribe was not religious and didn't want a funeral, Graham says. "To be blunt, he wanted to go straight from the hospital to the crematorium and didn't want people saying prayers over him."

He is survived by his children Graham, Elizabeth, Douglas and Caroline; two sisters Rita and Phyllis ("Fizz"); eight grandchildren and one great-grandchild. There will be a public celebration of his life in the next few weeks.

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