### ARTS 17

# 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 glassesbelt 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 Wailers 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 statecontrolled press Los Van Van's playful and sometimes risque lyrics function as social commentary. The stories the songs tell about overcrowding in Havana, say, or the importance of the Afro-Cuban Santeria 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? "Si," people say, "Es van van."

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



One of the keys to Los Van Van's longevity is the band's ability to embrace new styles; its sometimes risque 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

first time in 2006.

- in 1999, thousands of anti-Castro Cuban exiles picketed a packed Miami Arena with plac-"I never thought we would get ards declaring Van Van "bandits" his far," says bassist and founder and "communist beggars" —

"The Australian audiences All eminently danceable. "I never were very receptive," says Samuel miss a chance to play in Cuba,' Formell of Los Van Van's critically says the Havana-born Formell. "As soon as I get back from being acclaimed concerts in Sydney and Melbourne, where various band abroad, I hit the street and find out members enjoyed a post-show what is going on. Cuba and its peojam with local musicians at innerple have always been my source of inspiration. I consider myself a "They really love salsa so we storyteller.'

connected with them quickly. Our And an innovator? He smiles. music is for dancing and that is "Times change very quickly in what they did, from the first song music. It is too easy to get left behind. If you don't renew yourself, Known affectionately in Cuba you die. as Saint Juan, Juan Formell is a

The Van Van were mavericks major presence here at the Karl from the start. Before the band's Marx Theatre, alternately pluckformation, Formell was musical ing his double bass and sharing director of a French-Haitian influlead vocals in a vibrant set that enced *charanga* orchestra, whose

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" Pedroso and flamboyant vocalist Pedro Calvo (both of whom left to form their own groups in 2002), the Beatlesloving 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 abre

more edgy, a little less smooth, protest. "Los Van Van rocks down-Formell pilfered curly-haired town Miami,' trumpeted the Miasinger Yeni Valdes, the band's first mi Herald. "Miami isn't as aggressfemale member, from rival outfit ive as it was," says Formell. NG La Banda. "There's a new, younger gener-

ation that thinks differently.'

dancers spin and blur.

The crowd at the Karl Marx

goes crazy when Mayito launches

into the hit Soy Todo, a Cuban flag

draped around his shoulders. The

ometer," says Formell, when

asked to explain the band's lon-

gevity. "I try and write music that

"The dancers are our bar-

He got the dreadlocked Mayito rapping as well as singing and the flat-cap-wearing Roberton 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. anticipates changing dance styles. is Cuba, where musicality is highly If we're not away, then we play at regarded and most musicians are least once a week in Cuba, so we conservatoire-trained: where see how the public reacts. every musician is a soloist; where "Sometimes a new musical idea if you pick up a rock, people say, takes a few years to be accepted, so vou'll find a musician underneath. we have to be patient." So what if Van Van's live shows He smiles. "Which is OK," he says. "We have until the future." sometimes seem like the band's on autopilot, cruising along on a Los Van Van will be performing at greatest hits package? Its mem-

## Survivor back at his desk

#### **IAIN SHEDDEN**

VETERAN music producer Richard Lush has worked on thousands of recording sessions, with everyone from the Beatles down. On Sunday, sitting at the mixing desk in Sydney's Studios 301, the English-born producer was happy to be back doing what he does best — but happier still to be alive.

Lush, 62, is back at work after more than a year in hospital. What at first seemed like a routine pain in his neck turned out to be a life-threatening rare spinal condition known as spinal dural arteriovenous fistula.

He spent weeks in intensive care before his illness was diagnosed, enduring chemotherapy and a gradual loss of function in his limbs. His family was told to prepare for the worst.

Now, eight months after receiving life-saving surgery, Lush, who was second engineer on Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and hundreds of other sessions at London's Abbey Road studios, is working the mixing console from his wheelchair as he fights to get back to full fitness.

"I'm a very determined person," he says while putting the final touches to his new project, an album by Sydney jazz musician Mark Isaacs. "It's so good to be hearing music again."

Lush was an engineer on almost 100 Beatles recording sessions and worked with many other British acts such as the Hollies, Shirley Bassey and Cliff Richard before moving to Australia in the early 1970s.

One of his first big hits here was Sherbet's No.1 Howzat, which he produced in 1976. Since then he has worked with a variety of Aussie talent, from Human Nature to the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

Isaacs, unaware of Lush's condition, called the producer not long after his surgery to ask him to work on his album. Lush agreed, provided he was fit enough to do it. "Having survived such an ordeal I was just happy to be alive," Lush says. "Work wasn't uppermost in my mind. Not being able to walk was my main concern. Once I started thinking about being back at work, I started thinking about whether I could get through the doors. And it can be a long way to go and change a microphone."

Lush is undergoing regular physiotherapy and rehabilitation programs. He is still uncertain about whether he will be able to walk again, but he's determined to keep recording music. "If you like music you're in there forever," he says.

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 increasFormell has become picky about cherry picks from more than 30 alwhen and where he performs. bums' worth of hits.

city club the Night Cat.

to the last.

There are early songs such as Noticeable by his absence on Van Van's most recent annual visit to the Latin funk-meets-pop track London (where the leadership Chirrun Chirran and the 1980s baton was wielded by his percussmash Disco Azucar: songs from 2000's Grammy-winning record sionist son, Samuel), he will be accompanying the band on its Llego Van Van (Here is Van Van) coming tour of Australia, where and the current acclaimed Ar-Los Van Van performed for the rasando (a word that means to demolish the bad). All compelling.

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

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

bers' knack for working a crowd the Arts Centre, Melbourne, August 11; Queensland Performing means they never disappoint. A 3500-strong concert in Mia-Arts Centre, August 13: Svdnev Opera House, August 15.

milast January took place without

"There's nothing like catching a great performance: a great vocal or a great guitar solo. That's what it's all about."

### 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.

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 anniversarv 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



Ken Tribe

rather than requiring others to do it".

Tribe was involved with several theatre companies and had an enduring love for Shakespeare — he was able to recite large slabs by heart — but the arts weren't his only interest.

For 40 years, from 1942, he was on the board of the Adult Deaf Society of NSW (introduced to the organisation by his first father-in-law, David Dey), and helped set up the Australian Caption Centre. He was also involved with the Winifred West Schools (Frensham), Sydney College of the Arts, the NSW Conservatorium, the Australian Chamber Orchestra and the Centenary Institute for medical research.

The middle child of Cecil Tribe, supervisor of lighting for Sydney County Council, and his wife Elizabeth, Kenneth Wilberforce Tribe was brought up in Arncliffe, and went to school at Bexley before winning a place at St Andrew's Cathedral School in Sydney.

It was at St Andrew's that he developed his love of music (the string quartet was to become a particular passion) and as a boy soprano had a short-lived career in performance.

In midlife he tried to learn the clarinet; otherwise his performances were limited to whistling for friends. He had perfected an impress-

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. LETA KEENS



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