

Cuban and Proud

Jane Cornwell catches up with Cuban pianist Roberto Fonseca just prior to the launch of his latest album, a homage to his home country and its rich musical history

Roberto Fonseca stands on his rooftop balcony in Vedado, Havana and looks out across the city and the blue-green Florida Straits. “I couldn’t live anywhere other than Cuba,” says the pianist, composer and bandleader, 41, as a potted palm sways in the breeze and unmuffled engines snarl along the street six floors below.

“Musically there is so much that inspires me, from the traditional to the new, crazy, adventurous stuff.”

He sweeps a well-honed arm over the skyline and by implication, the rest of this beleaguered, creatively fecund island. “It’s all going on out there,” he continues in accented English made fluent by a rigorous tour schedule that, over the last decade-and-a-half, has taken him around the world several times. “I wanted to tell the story of Cuba’s musical history in my own way, to show people the crazy things we are doing, as well as our beautiful roots. I have a big faith,” – he flashes a grin – “that everybody is going to love this album.”

ABUC (that’s Cuba spelled backwards) is Fonseca’s eighth solo record and arguably his most ambitious. Featuring everything from mambo, *contradanza* and *chachachá* to Afro-Cuban chants, West African instrumentation and wheeling, prog-rock style Hammond organ – not to mention hip-hop, spoken word and some sparkling electro flourishes – it’s a snapshot of Cuba’s past, present and future; an album as kaleidoscopic and multilayered as the place itself.

It’s a symbol, too, of where Fonseca is at, four years after the release of his Grammy-nominated masterwork, *Yo*, an Afro-centric project that also matched tradition with experimentation and marked a change in Fonseca’s compositional approach, most specifically on the track ‘7 Rayos’. A homage to the Palo Mayombe religion of the Yoruba people who moved from Africa to Cuba with the slave trade,

‘7 Rayos’ fuses Cuban patterns with classical music, West African instrumentation, electronica and rhythmic spoken-word poetry. “‘7 Rayos’ is the most important song I have ever done in my life,” Fonseca told me just after *Yo* dropped. “I mixed all these elements, created a bridge between African tradition and moved my music forward.”

There have been giant steps since, including a stint with Gilles Peterson’s Havana Cultura project and a long tour with Malian singing star Fatoumata Diawara, whose guest vocals on *Yo* (on a cover of ‘Bibisa’ by Malian *griot* Baba Sissoko) kick-started an acclaimed live collaboration. They went on to play venues such as London’s Barbican and the Philharmonie de Paris and festivals including Jazz in Marciac, the town in southwest France that has *j’adore*-d Fonseca since 2004, when he accompanied the crooner Ibrahim Ferrer, more of which in a moment.

“Working with Fatou opened my mind about the possibilities of percussion and guitar,” says Fonseca, who still treasures his copy of Salif Keita’s 1987 debut, *Soro*, the first African album he ever bought. “The *kamalengoni* has thousands of rhythms and melodies, and this influenced me when I composed new tracks like ‘Tumbao de la Unidad’ for guitar [the guitar of one of his childhood heroes, *guajiro* singer Eliades Ochoa] and ‘Soul Guardians’ [featuring Diawara’s backing musicians, electric guitarist Sekou Bah and *kamalengoni* player Drissa Sidibé], which is a funky, sort of acoustic African reggaeton.”

He set the bar high with *Yo*, which has sold over 60,000 copies and put him in the same league as best-selling instrumental artists such as bassist Marcus Miller and trumpeter Ibrahim Maalouf. Expectations over its follow-up never bothered him: “All I worry about is trying to be a better musician,” he says with ▶



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a shrug. "I am composing, always composing, especially when I am here at home."

He nods towards his living room, with its low sofa, wooden coffee table and state-of-the-art record player, its Buddhist statues from China and Indonesia and colourful shrine to Changó, the warrior deity of the Afro-Cuban Santería religion and Fonseca's designated *orisha*. In the corner, positioned for a view of city, sea and sky, is the black hybrid (acoustic/digital) baby grand on which he practices, stymied from time to time by the city's random electricity blackouts.

"So I decided to focus on Cuba. Not the clichéd Cuba of maracas and *guayaberas* [the traditional short-sleeved shirt of the countryside] but my Cuba. You know, many people play what they call Latin jazz or Latin fusion but few play our Afro-Cuban music."

He pauses, watching a shirtless guy laying cement on a terrace below. "I'm trying to be like Abdullah Ibrahim," he says, namechecking the iconic South African pianist and composer whose oeuvre embraces influences ranging from traditional African songs to gospel, classical, Indian *ragas*, the modern jazz of Thelonious Monk and beyond. "I'm trying to be the guy who combines many elements but still has his roots, his Cuban roots, as the base."

Fonseca has long aspired to be a reference point. He told me so way back in 2007, when we met in the foyer of a grand Havana hotel in the wake of *Zamazu*, the album on which he proved himself a composer and performer in his own right. He'd already come to international attention via the Buena Vista Social Club, having taken over the piano chair from Rubén González (1919-2003) and then toured the globe with Ferrer (1927-2005) – who'd fallen ill onstage at Marciac, his last concert before he passed away, "so I improvised a song right there." In 2010 he was the support act for Omara Portuondo's US tour.

His musical leanings were nurtured early in the humble *barrio* of his birth; his father, Roberto Fonseca Senior, an electrician, played the drums. His mother, Mercedes Cortes Alfaro, is a singer and former dancer at Havana's famed Tropicana Club and was previously married to famed jazz pianist Chucho Valdés; Fonseca's two elder half-brothers are a drummer and a pianist. Roberto started playing drums at the age of four. His first professional gig, sitting in Ringo's spot, was in a Beatles' cover band.

His piano technique is duly percussive, muscular, Monk-like. But there was a hard-rock phase first: Iron Maiden, AC/DC, Quiet Riot. "I loved the energy, and the bass lines." One weekend he was sitting in his mother's kitchen, listening to head-banging heavy metal, when the cassette clicked off and he had an epiphany. "I felt this peace. I was like, 'What was I just listening to?' My tastes changed. I discovered the piano and jazz. Keith Jarrett. Chick Corea. Oscar Peterson, who played so fast and made it look so easy, like his piano was an extension of him."

Fonseca tops and tails *ABUC* with 'Cubano Chant', that well-known theme covered by Art Blakey, ▶



Arien Chang Castan

Ray Bryant, Cal Tjader and most famously, by Peterson; Fonseca often likes to pepper his *descargas* with phrases from the tune. "Wherever people are, whatever country they are in," he told me in that hotel foyer in 2007 (Cubans are not allowed to go in anywhere that caters to tourists, though Fonseca insists much has changed), "I want them to hear my music and say, 'This is Roberto Fonseca.'"

They do now. They'd certainly started to then; *Zamazu* was a milestone for Fonseca, who had already achieved several of them, including making his live solo debut aged 15 at Havana's Jazz Plaza festival (he has just been announced as director of its sister event, the inaugural Santiago de Cuba Jazz Festival to take place December 15-18) and graduating from the prestigious Instituto Superior de Arte. He'd recorded a clutch of albums including 2001's cult classic *No Limit: AfroCuban Jazz*.

Zamazu's importance is underscored in Fonseca's apartment, with the word emblazoned in stained glass built into a wall above shelves crammed with his signature Trilbys and leather Byblos hats. Many of the latter come courtesy of agnès b, the iconic French fashion designer who is Fonseca's self-appointed stylist, variously dressing him for his live shows, kitting him out in a blue tuxedo for the 2013 Grammys and providing the sharp black suit, white shirt and leather hat he's wearing on the cover of *ABUC*. "We share ideas, concepts," he says. "I'm lucky with the relationship we have."

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The fact that the photo sees him reclining on a piano that happens to be hanging in mid air, somewhere in the middle of crumbling, characterful Havana Vieja (Old Havana), is, however, all Fonseca's own work. "I have never seen anyone do this sort of thing with a piano before. We set it up like a film set with cranes and cables. At one point, I was dangling upside down in a harness but the photographer told me my face looked too different, too funny," he says, laughing. "It was a circus trick, a crazy thing. I like crazy things."

In music, as in life. Two years in the making, *ABUC* features Fonseca's long-time bandmates and fellow risk takers, double bassist Yandy Martínez and percussionist and drummer Ramsés 'Dynamite' Rodríguez, with whom he shares a questing curiosity, a passion for musical experimentation and a desire to keep things current. A couple of days after this interview I catch them performing at the Havana jazz club, La Zorro y el Cuervo, testing each other with lightning-fast rhythm changes, with Rodríguez's drum kit directly opposite Fonseca's piano, both men smiling, watching the other.

"We do this all the time to keep fresh," says Fonseca. "When we're on tour, we are always going out to other concerts, or if we're at a festival we'll check the programme and analyse the acts; we're like, 'Did you see that? What was that pattern?' There was a Romanian group we saw in Holland that had this guy on electronic sax playing these tempos that weren't 4/4 or 6/8, we ▶

were crazy for them but we didn't know what they were. We were all arguing about them as we went back to the hotel."

Touring is both a blessing and a curse for a man who loves his sleep, especially in his own bed. Two of the guests that grace *ABUC* have come from serendipitous encounters on the road; New Orleans-based Trombone Shorty is there on the opening 'Cubano Chant' and Brazilian percussionist Zé Luis Nascimento adds deft touches here and there. But this is an overwhelmingly Cuban effort, with over 30 gifted guests. A record lent further authenticity by the crackle of old vinyl recordings on 'Afro Mambo', a track that sees Cubana *du jour* Daymé Arocena, laughing uproariously before joining tenor wonder Carlos Calunga in song. The dreamy 'Contradanza del Espíritu' also visits another era: "I wanted to make something epic, without solos. To me this one feels like walking down the hallway of a grand hall, opening a door and finding this other life."

The percussion and found sounds on 'Tierra Santa' recreates a vision of Santiago-meets-New Orleans, a movie Fonseca had playing in his head. "I imagined a *conguero* from Santiago de Cuba" – a town on the eastern part of the island, host to an explosive carnival each July – "going to New Orleans and seeing some guys playing on the street whose patterns remind him of home. He tells the horn players and drummers about the congas in Santiago and they end up going there with him." Singers Rafael Lay Bravo and Roberto Espinosa Rodríguez

from Orquesta Aragón, the best *charanga* (traditional ensemble) in Cuba in the 1950s and 60s, grace the fusion-tastic 'Family', a sort of electro-*chá*; 'Sagrado Corazon,' a paean to mothers, sees Fonseca playing a chachachá the traditional way. The voice of soprano Bárbara Llanes lifts the unmistakably Afro-Cuban 'Habanera' sky-high, while Fonseca's mother Mercedes Cortes Alfaro sings on 'Despues', a *bolero* featuring ex-BVSC trumpet player Manuel 'Guajiro' Mirabal.

'Asere Monina Bonco', which features the brilliant flute playing of the late Policarpo 'Polo' Tamayo (who passed away in May) is a jam as jaunty as the title's play on words. Right near the end, Fonseca gifts us 'Velas y Flores' (Candles and Flowers), a track that evokes a spiritual mass, all the more powerful by his own sonorous, spoken-word vocals. "I'm expressing what I feel when I gaze inwards," he offers, "and speaking in a very deep way, as if from behind a veil. I'm saying that I come from a humble family, from nothing, but that we laugh and love and look out for each other. All of Cuba is like this, which is why I love this place and its people."

The music helps, of course. "We are lucky here." He stretches and smiles. "We are rich." ♦

+ **ALBUM** *ABUC* is a Top of the World this issue, see p48

+ **DATE** Roberto Fonseca will perform at the Barbican on March 13 2017, see www.barbican.org for details



Gabrielle Saplana