

# AND THE BEAT GOES ON

The man behind a Cuban revival is still going strong

JANE CORNWELL

When he stepped into the recording studios in Havana in 1996, Juan de Marcos Gonzalez had no idea he was about to make history. Back then the dapper bandleader and musician was overseeing a project bringing together three generations of Cuban players — “energy and experience”, he tells me — and had rounded up several elderly musicians whose careers stretched back to the pre-revolutionary 1950s but had since retired or faded from view. This big band of seven singers and 14 musicians he called the Afro-Cuban All Stars.

The album they made, *A Toda Cubale Gusta* (*All of Cuba Loves It*), was the first of three recordings produced during the 10-day booking at EGREM, the studios of the national Cuban record company. It was a disc that bottled what felt like a better, simpler era with old-world styles from mambo and rumba to danzon and son, unfurling over grooving percussion and insistent double bass; joyous horns chased piano melodies and singers told, in Spanish and Yoruba, the language of the West African ancestors, of the beauty of the island and the might and range of its Santeria deities. The songs were by the composers of yesterday, imaginatively arranged and rearranged by Gonzalez.

“Many of these old guys had been close friends of my dad,” Gonzalez, 65, says of his father, Marcos Gonzalez, a vocalist who had performed with respected Afro-Cuban bandleader and composer Arsenio Rodriguez. “I knew where to find them. I knew that (singer) Ibrahim Ferrer was working on the street, shining shoes. I knew that (pianist) Ruben Gonzalez had lost his piano to woodworm and walked five miles a day so he could use a piano belonging to a friend.”

If all this rings a bell, it should. The next album made at EGREM serendipitously ended up featuring many of the same elderly musicians, alongside additional veterans including singer Omara Portuondo, then 66, and 91-year-old singer-guitarist Compay Segundo. The latter’s most famous composition, the slow, dreamy *Chan Chan*, would be the opening track on the *Buena Vista Social Club*, the Grammy-winning recording produced by American guitarist Ry Cooder, directed by Juan de Marcos Gonzalez and released on London’s World Circuit label. Named after a long defunct, unremarkable Havana nightspot, it is still the biggest selling world music album.

On the eve of an Australian tour by a rejuvenated, 14-piece ACAS — featuring Gonzalez’s wife of 40 years, Gliceria, and daughters Laura and Gliceria Jr, both symphonic musicians — Gonzalez is sanguine about his legacy. Sitting backstage at London’s Barbican in his trademark white suit and black beret, he insists that the music has always been the thing. Current album *Absolutely Live II*, his first release in six years, takes in five genres of Cuban music, reimagining songs from those pivotal BVSC and ACAS albums and throwing in a few originals along the way.



Afro-Cuban All Stars founder Juan de Marcos Gonzalez, above; right, a scene from the popular 1999 documentary *Buena Vista Social Club* directed by Wim Wenders

‘We’ve kept our roots, our authenticity, through the centuries’

JUAN DE MARCOS GONZALEZ  
AFRO-CUBAN ALL STARS

“Wherever a Cuban band performs people are captivated by its quality and taste,” says Gonzalez. “I’m not just talking about established names but also small bands that entertain tourists in Old Havana. We’ve kept our roots, our authenticity, through the centuries, even through times when it was forbidden to play congas because playing with the hands was a ‘black’ thing.”

Gonzalez is in talks with a Broadway producer keen to re-

create, via a stage musical, the Buena Vista Social Club in its heyday. He also has spent several years writing an opera that will feature Cuban symphonic music, which is almost unknown worldwide, as well as the trials and tribulations of his own generation of Cuban musicians as they developed genres such as the fast-and-furious timba.

And while not a fan of reggaeton, the raw, beats-heavy sound that has pulsed from Cuba’s taxis, tower blocks and street corners since early this century (“There is too much swearing and sex”), he defends its right to be made.

“Currently our urban music is in danger with Decree 49,” he says, referring to the Cuban law that bars artists and musicians from operating without the approval of the Ministry of Culture.

“The government is afraid of



them, and trying to get control back.”

Gonzalez and his family have lived in Mexico City for more than a decade, initially relocating so that his daughters (he also has a son, a California-based engineer) could attend an elite music conservatoire there. While hardly a rebel — he has a PhD in Russian, for starters — the Havana-reared Cubano has always told it as he sees it. “I’ve been free my whole

life,” he says. “I was punished in the early 2000s with a two-year ban on performing with a band. They were expecting my defection from Cuba but I didn’t do it. Nobody was going to push me out of my country.”

Unlike the Buena Vista elders, Gonzalez doesn’t mind talking about politics. He remembers the way journalists used to fire questions about Fidel Castro at the likes of Segundo, who would re-

sort to the “I’m a musician, not a politician” disclaimer. Gonzalez prefers to discuss music, of course — and doesn’t withhold his disdain for “fake Buena Vistas”, the groups still making a buck by cashing in on the BVSC name.

“You go to Havana Vieja (Old Havana) and there are about five different bands calling themselves the Buena Vista All Stars and making money from tourists who are brought there by touts,” he says. “After the original old guys died, Buena Vista was no more. That should have been that.”

Gonzalez pursued his love of traditional Cuban music while at university, studying engineering and Russian, and in 1976 formed the folk band Sierra Maestra — named after the mountain range where Castro and Che Guevara established their guerilla base. Gonzalez, who played the tres guitar, wanted to revive classic 1920s Cuban son, the basis for salsa, a form that originated in Santiago in the east and had fallen out of favour. Sierra Maestra went on to record 14 albums and tour internationally, but it was 1994’s *Dundunbanza*, released on the World Circuit label, that proved pivotal.

Encouraged by Nick Gold, Gonzalez expanded the line-up to include 50s-style piano, horns and congas by way of tribute to Arsenio Rodriguez. The Afro-Cuban All Stars, with its line-up of neglected “golden age” stars, was founded two years later.

“There are a lot of things people don’t know,” says Gonzalez, who is writing a book about the time. “I met Nick Gold in London in the Camden house of (academic, producer and Cubophile) Lucy Duran, and she introduced me to (BVSC member) Eliades Ochoa at a party where we cooked the idea of Buena Vista.”

That seminal album had begun as a collaboration between musicians from Cuba and Mali, where Cuban music remains influential. But a saga of lost passports meant the Malians never arrived in Havana, and those assembled at EGREM had to do what Cubans do so well — improvise. When the great diva Celina Gonzalez declined to take part, Juan de Marcos Gonzalez co-opted another famous female vocalist, Portuondo, who was recording elsewhere in the building.

“The repertoire was all very eastern, from the east side of the island, because the Afro-Cuban All Stars was the one that was meant to be the ‘Havana project’. But then we mixed the western and eastern styles together, which is part of what makes the BVSC album special. It was an amazing three weeks. We’d record all day and all the musicians would go home, except for Ruben, who kept playing.”

To keep history alive, you have to keep it fresh. “I had no idea the Afro-Cuban All Stars would still be going strong, 23 years on,” says Gonzalez. “I make sure I change the line-up every couple of years. Touring a big band is expensive but this is the best way to play the Afro Cuban music I’ve been playing all my life.”

“I’m the same age now as some of those old Buena Vista guys were then. I’ll be playing this music until I die.” He flashes a smile. “And hopefully forever after.”

*The Afro-Cuban All Stars perform in Adelaide, tonight; Melbourne, Sunday; Canberra, March 27; Sydney, March 29 and March 30.*



COLIN MURTY

Sonia Payes’s *Women in Bronze* was a hit at Cottesloe

## Tide going out on west’s Sculpture by the Sea

The organisers and state government are arguing over funding

VICTORIA LAURIE

The two giant faces looking out across sand and sea at Cottesloe Beach represent the dilemma faced by Sculpture by the Sea, the popular cultural event that has launched local artists’ careers across 15 years and this summer entertained nearly a quarter of a million visitors at Perth’s busiest beach.

One face of *Women in Bronze*, by Sonia Payes, represents the success of a free event that has seen roughly one in six Perth residents come to view 70 sculptural works during its 18-day run, which ended on Monday.

But the other face represents the financial backers who have turned away from the event, with the loss of three major sponsors and funding from corporate sources dropping from 26 per cent of total revenue to only 8 per cent this year.

It poses a tricky challenge to Sculpture by the Sea’s founding director, David Handley, who says he has had to go public for support — especially from the West Australian government’s Department for Cultural Industries — or contemplate cancelling next year’s event. “A free event of this scale needs significantly more support from government and more corporate sponsors to get behind it,” Handley says.

He says the next three months are critical if the Cottesloe event, launched in 2005 as a west coast version of the long-running sister exhibition at Bondi in Sydney, is to resurface next year. Handley wants an ongoing commitment from the WA government akin to the annual funding of \$300,000 provided by Create NSW for his Bondi event during the past nine years. Handley claims he has made attempts to seek WA arts funding “but it was explicitly stated to us we were not eligible”.

Handley’s complaint was closely followed by an open letter by 50 exhibiting West Australian artists to Premier Mark McGowan, saying they are “disappointed the department does not provide substantial funding” for Sculpture by the Sea Cottesloe.

The issue has since escalated into a terse, even prickly exchange of views. Arts Minister David Templeman (with whom Handley says he has a good relationship) has responded that \$400,000 has gone to Sculpture by the Sea Cottesloe this year alone via grants for targeted activities such as education and advertising from Lotterywest and Tourism WA. As for Handley’s

claim of ineligibility, Templeman says “an open and competitive multi-year funding program is available to support West Australian arts organisations to produce annual programs of activity”.

“The last Organisations Investment Program, which supports multi-year funding, started in 2015, for which Sculpture by the Sea was eligible to apply. No application was received,” Templeman says.

He says his arts ministry has committed nearly \$258,000 during the life of the event, which has been successful in 79 per cent of applications submitted. “In addition, participating artists have been supported through the Arts Grants Programs to participate in both the Cottesloe and Bondi Sculpture by the Sea events.”

Handley responds that the \$258,000 was for artists’ fees across a 15-year period, a \$1000 payment to each participating artist to cover costs. That arrangement ended in 2017, “which I found mind-boggling”.

The unifying airing of views leaves Sculpture by the Sea Cottesloe in a precarious position, wedged between flagging corporate support and an unsympathetic government that McGowan announced last week would not pay any more.

In reality, Handley says he has now been “invited” to put an application into the department’s Organisations Investment Program, which provides funds of up to \$300,000. But successful applicants will be notified in November, long after invitations are due to go out to artists to submit concepts for the 2020 event.

It means the fate of the sculpture event may lie with influential corporate figures and private philanthropists who tend to make Cottesloe and the nearby wealthy suburbs their home. It has happened before: shortfalls over several years were met by generous cheques from high-profile benefactors including Gina Rinehart and philanthropist and Cottesloe resident Andrew Forrest, who also has purchased sculptures from the event.

Handley’s call for a direct government stake in the state’s cultural life resonates with artists.

Mikaela Castledine, who previously has won Cottesloe’s major sculpture prize and believes her sculpture career was effectively launched there, says closure would be tragic for West Australian artists looking to connect with eastern states and overseas markets.

“Sculpture by the Sea allows artists to price and sell their work for amounts that, while maybe still not covering all costs, at least allows them to continue to work and support their families,” Castledine says.

## Unbalanced ambitions sabotage production

### THEATRE

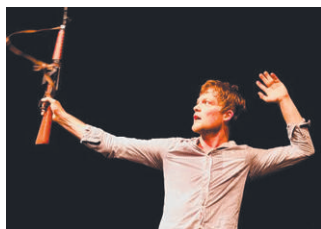
Bin Laden: The One Man Show  
By Sam Redway and Tyrrell Jones. Knaive Theatre. Theatre Works, St Kilda, March 19.

CHRIS BOYD

Given the lofty ambitions of *Bin Laden: The One Man Show* — to humanise the emir of al-Qaeda — and the acclaim Knaive Theatre’s show has received since its 2013 British premiere, I was expecting something heftier and less like theatre-in-education.

After welcoming punters with tea and biscuits, Osama (Sam Redway) gives a flip-chart lecture on how to change the world. Drawing on the published 9/11 Commission report and interviews with bin Laden’s first wife, Najwa, and son Omar, *The One Man Show* falls well short of establishing bin Laden’s credentials as a freedom fighter.

Indeed, the only moral complexity bin Laden is allowed comes in an account of his meet-



Sam Redway as bin Laden.

ing with Ayman al-Zawahiri, co-founder of al-Qaeda, whose headline anti-Shi’ite policies troubled the son of a Shia woman.

Writers Redway and Tyrrell Jones omit the crucial fact bin Laden had no stomach to fight the US until its soldiers stayed in the Middle East after the liberation of Kuwait. The play is also sabotaged by an outraged certainty that the September 11 attacks were a disproportionate response to that country’s many strikes on Muslim nations that caused comparable losses in infrastructure and civilian lives.

*Tickets: \$35. Bookings: (03) 9534 3388 or online. Duration: 1hr. Until Sunday, then Canberra, March 26-31; Sydney, April 3-6.*

### YOUR NATIONAL CULTURE GUIDE

#### NOW SHOWING

**Pimped** (MA15+)

The realisation that each sex has its strengths, weaknesses, rights, wrongs and mysteries is at the core of the psychosexual thriller *Pimped*, the feature film debut of David Barker, who wrote the script with Lou Mentor. The opening scene ends with a tall, dark, handsome man closing a door on some debauchery that he has organised. He seems to be a pimp. We then move to the day and night that take up the rest of the movie. An attractive young woman, Sarah, is sleeping in her apartment. A raven-haired woman, Rachel, nudges her awake. Sarah (Ella Scott Lynch) does doll up and go to a bar, where she meets Lewis (Benedit Samuel). Something repugnant happens: to Sarah, but not only to her. There are multiple twists and shocks involving the nature of the characters and what happens to them. Veteran actors Heather Mitchell and Lewis

Fitz-Gerald take the story into even darker places.  
**STEPHEN ROMIE ★★☆☆**

#### NSW

##### EXHIBITION

**Fang Lijun: Facial Recognition**

This show presents an evolution of the Beijing artist’s style.  
**GLENDIA KORPORAL**  
*Vermilion Art. 5/16 Hickson Road, Walsh Bay. Wed-Sat, 11am-7pm. Free entry. Inquiries: (02) 9241 3323 or online. Until April 6.*

#### NORTHERN TERRITORY

##### EXHIBITION

**Weapons for the Soldier**  
With support from senior artists

Frank Young, Mumu Mike Williams, Kunmanara Ken, Peter Mungkuri and Willy Kaika Burton, the young men of the APY Lands — Vincent Namatjira, Derek Jungarrayi Thompson, Aaron Ken, Anwar Young and Kamurin Young — show their work in *Weapons for the Soldier*. This exhibition explores the struggle of indigenous people to sustain cultural strength.  
**Araluen Arts Centre, 61 Larapinta Drive, Araluen. Daily, 10am-4pm. Tickets: \$6-\$8. Inquiries: (08) 8951 1120 or online. Until April 22.**

#### QUEENSLAND

##### STAGE

**Demi Lardner: Ditch Witch 800**

Australian comedian Demi Lardner (pictured) brings her hit show *Ditch Witch 800* — winner of the Underbelly Award at the 2017 Edinburgh Fringe and last year’s Pinder Prize at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival — to the Brisbane Powerhouse as part of the Brisbane Comedy Festival. Directed by Michelle Brasier.



**Brisbane Powerhouse, Rooftop Terrace, 119 Lamington Street, New Farm. Tonight and tomorrow, 8.15pm; Sunday, 7.15pm. Tickets: \$27-\$29. Bookings: (07) 3358 8600 or online.**

#### WESTERN AUSTRALIA

##### EXHIBITION

**Alchemic**

Transgender artist Cassils exhibits for the first time in Australia, featuring video, photographic and sculpture works. Cassils’s work seeks to question the art world, using the artist’s own body.  
**Perth Cultural Centre, PICA Gallery, Francis and William Street, Northbridge. Tues-Sun, 10am-5pm.**

Free entry. Inquiries: (08) 9228 6300 or online. Until April 14.

#### VICTORIA

##### MUSIC

**Mahler 10: Letters and Readings**

Actor Tama Matheson appears with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Andrew Davis, in a program that features readings of Gustav Mahler’s personal letters and Mahler/Cooke’s Symphony No 10.  
**Arts Centre Melbourne, Hamer Hall, 100 St Kilda Road. Tomorrow, 2pm. Tickets: \$54-\$149. Bookings: (03) 9929 9600 or online. Duration: 2hr, including a 20min interval.**

#### TASMANIA

##### EXHIBITION

**Grace Herbert: Increase Productivity**

Tasmanian artist Grace Herbert investigates themes of control through body composition

assessment technology. Herbert was selected for the Shotgun program, which offers artists critical engagement, production assistance and industry access.  
**Contemporary Art Tasmania, 27 Tasna Street, North Hobart. Wed-Sun, 12-5pm. Free event. Inquiries: (03) 6231 0445 or online. Until April 21.**

#### SOUTH AUSTRALIA

##### STAGE

**Hannah Gadsby: Douglas**

Following her hit show *Nanette*, Hannah Gadsby performs an exclusive preview season of her new show, *Douglas*.  
**Adelaide Festival Centre, Dunstan Playhouse, King William Street. Tonight, 7.30pm; tomorrow, 4.30pm and 7.30pm; Sunday, 7.30pm. Tickets: \$64.90. Inquiries: 131 246 or online. Duration: 1hr 10min.**

**Edited by**

**Sophia Morrison**

Full reviews of new films will appear in *The Weekend Australian* on Saturday

Send event information to **listings@theaustralian.com.au**