

VIVA LA REVOLUCION!

With Cuba currently undergoing the hardest ‘maximum pressure’ economic embargo by the USA under the Trump regime, with energy supply severely cut and the country in darkness for much of the time, **Jane Cornwell** talks to **Roberto Fonseca** and other Cuban musicians about how their lives are affected and the healing power of the country’s music.

In Cuba, jazz has never stood still. As good jazz does, it breathes, mutates, absorbs and reforms. And right now, set against a backdrop of the worst economic and humanitarian crises in the beleaguered island’s history – intensified by the orange madman in the Whitehouse tightening the decades-old US embargo – it endures as something more than music: a lifeline.

“My country is suffering difficulties that I have never experienced before – ever,” says the Grammy-nominated jazz pianist and composer Roberto Fonseca, 51, at home in Havana – a loft apartment inside a former cigar factory. He has just returned from a successful tour of Hong Kong and Australia, performing his 2023 album *La Gran Diversión* – an acclaimed tribute to

Cuba’s golden era – with UK and European shows to come.

The contrast is stark: sold-out halls and cheering festival crowds abroad. Darkness, quite literally, at home.

“We are spending 16 hours without electricity here; in other parts of the country, they are going without power for days. The streets in Havana are empty. Many are filled with garbage. There are no buses or taxis. People are sad. They feel like they don’t have a future. I have always stayed out of politics,” he continues, palpably angry, “but this isn’t just about the embargo.”

Government mismanagement has left state enterprises struggling. Tourism has collapsed. Bars with generators operate sporadically, some hosting live jazz. Power cuts disrupt even the popular youth arts venue *Fabrica de Arté*, while *La Zorro y El Cuervo* – the basement venue where Fonseca has played for decades – flickers in and out of action. Nothing is guaranteed. The other day, after soundchecking for a solo concert, Fonseca returned to find the venue dark, its doors locked.

“I postponed the concert to the next day, and it went great. But this messes with people’s heads. I have always come back for my family” – his mother, the revered singer Mercedes Cortés Alfaro, died two years ago – “but it kills me to see my people like this. They deserve better. So I play my music so they can escape, just for that moment.”

For 10 years now Fonseca has been artistic director of the Havana Jazz Festival, a role previously held by jazz legend Chucho Valdés, who founded the annual shindig back in 1978 with Cuban musicians including singer/multi-instrumentalist Bobby Carcassés (whose son Roberto helms the jazz collective *Interactivo*) and notably, late UK saxophonist Ronnie Scott – the London club owner whose love of Cuban jazz was evident in Valdés and Irakere’s famed five-week 1985 residency in Frith St (Ronnie’s continues to programme a strong Cuban strand – pianists Harold Lopez-Nussa and Alfredo Rodríguez; AfroCuban powerhouse Cimafunk; timba orchestra, Eliane Correa y *La Evolución* and more).

“We’re now programming in Holguín, Camagüey, Matanzas and Santiago de Cuba as well,” says Fonseca, whose ‘laboratory’ approach to curating encourages stylistic diversity. “It is mainly Cuban musicians playing, but we also

Che Guevara Monument, Santa Clara, Cuba
- Photo by Jon Newey