

bring in artists from the US and Europe (among this year's line-up, NYC post-bop pianist Aaron Goldberg). It's risky for overseas artists; some may struggle to enter the US easily afterwards. There are not many flights. Plane tickets are increasing."

He sighs. "I don't know what we will do."

Still, the music persists. "It will never stop. We sit together talking about all the problems we have, but at the end we say, 'You know what? We are lucky – we have the music.'"

It's a long way from the days when Cuba rejected jazz – American jazz – as the sound of the enemy.

"I can remember being a teenager playing Miles Davis – maybe it was Oscar Peterson – with friends in a classroom," says Fonseca, whose deft fusion of American jazz and AfroCuban rhythms saw him play the Havana Jazz Festival, aged just 15. Like many of Cuba's superlative players, he obtained a masters degree in composition – in his case, from Instituto Superior de Arte – another exemplar of Cuba's post-1959 revolution state support for the arts, which has long meant conservatory training, salaried musicians and cultural infrastructure.

"The teacher rushed in and told us we could not play this music in the school because it was the music of America," he continues. "I mean, really? How can you say this when musicians like Mario Bauzá and Machito were so famous around the world?"

Cuban music has always shaped jazz just as profoundly as jazz has shaped Cuba. From Dizzy Gillespie's collaborations with Chano Pozo to Bauzá and Machito's innovations – their 1943 big band piece 'Tanga' is widely considered the first true AfroCuban jazz composition – the exchange is foundational. Big name (jazz-fuelled) timba bands such as Irakere, Los Van Van and NG La Banda became training grounds for generations, Arturo Sandoval and Paquito d'Rivera among them. This wasn't jazz with Cuban elements. It was Cuban music refracted through jazz.


Oreste Noda, a Matanzas-born conguero and London music promoter, tells me the story of Gillespie's later visit to Havana – both a symbolic bridge, and a mythmaking enterprise. Having spotted extraordinary musical talent everywhere, Gillespie is nevertheless said to have been stunned to discover that his unassuming driver was the young [trumpeter] Arturo Sandoval.

"He saw him warming up at a jazz session and was like, 'Wait, that's my driver! What's he doing with a trumpet in his hands?' says Noda, underlining the fact that in Cuba, virtuosity is near ubiquitous.

At the root of it all is the clavé – that deceptively simple pair of wooden sticks whose 2:3 or 3:2 pattern underpins almost everything in Cuban music, lending rhythmic integrity to the harmonic movement of American jazz. It is also rumba, an elemental form born in the ports and working-class neighbourhoods of Havana and particularly Matanzas, two hours away, in the late 19th century.

Rumba remains the sound of the marginalised – of communities denied power but rich in expression. Drums were often banned. Boxes became instruments. With its African languages (Yoruba, Bantu) folded within Spanish lyrics, it's a music of resistance disguised as celebration.

Having run a successful monthly series of timba nights featuring an orchestra of UK-based Cuban musicians fronted by guest Cuban singers flown in from Europe, Noda (whose company Sambroso Sambroso runs Cuban Sundays salsa in Camden, and whose family has ties to Los Muñequitos de Matanzas, the most famous rumba group in Cuba) is currently



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– Roberto Fonseca

curating a high-energy rumba programme in Camden. It will feature top Europe-based rumberos in funk-heavy happenings that combine dance, storytelling, ritual and music in a rum-fuelled DIY party.

"The rhythms of Afro-Cuban rumba have even influenced hip-hop and house music," says Noda, who has played with everyone from Ska Cubano to Jazz Jamaica and his own Sambroso Allstars. "This rumba music is in my blood. It lets me play jazz. It has taken me across the world."

Traces of rumba lace the percussive piano language pioneered by Chucho Valdés and Gonzalo Rubalcaba, whose phrasing draws from the bata-drums intrinsic to Afro-Cuban ritual. But Cuban jazz is pushing forward: Interactivo, loose and experimental, reimagined what Cuban jazz could be. From it emerged artists who blur jazz with funk, hip-hop and Cuban popular forms, recontextualizing tradition through rap, digital production, reggaeton and increasingly, its timba-rooted cousin, reperto.

The new generation – those who have not yet left for Miami, Madrid or London, continue to play Coltrane, Miles, Oscar Peterson. They fold in electronics and global influences: access to the internet has meant opened windows onto scenes in London, Chicago, Cape Town and Melbourne. Fonseca sees both possibility and risk in this shift.

"It can flatten identity," he says. "When I was young, we didn't have the exact notes for the solos in the pieces we loved. But many of these instrumentalists sound the same because they're all playing the same transcriptions."

Innovation over imitation persists. Jam sessions in kitchens, crumbling buildings and back streets is where the music continues to evolve. Noda recalls watching a jazz outfit with four saxophonists in Santiago de Cuba; Cuban jazz, he says, is a mindset.

Increasingly, too, renewal is happening beyond Cuba's borders. The diaspora complicates the narrative. Still, if Cuban jazz is no longer geographically contained, its identity remains undeniable.

Roberto Fonseca knows how privileged he is to be able to leave – to play at Cheltenham Festival and the Barbican (on 4 and 13 May respectively), and in France, where he is a superstar. There are also concerts with cellist Vincent Segal, his collaborator on this year's *Nuit Parisienne à la Havane*, a beautiful piano-cello/jazz-classical dialogue that seems to offers a temporary balm for Cuba.

Unlike other Cubans, Fonseca will always return home.

"The music is one of the only things that is getting us through," he says.

Jazz was originally music of resistance, I say, and he sighs heavily again. "For Cuba, jazz is now the music of healing," he says. 🎧