

BLUES LATINO CON SABOR A OTTAWA.

Four area musicians helped Cuban guitarist Elmer Ferrer record his new album last May in Havana. The work gets its debut tomorrow at the Rainbow Bistro, reports CHRIS LACKNER.

Latin blues with a taste of Ottawa

While Ottawa has invited Cuban musicians to Bluesfest since 2002, this year, one of them returned the favour.

Burgeoning blues-rock guitarist Elmer Ferrer welcomed four Ottawa residents to Havana in May to help record his new album.

The project required equal leaps of faith on the parts of Mr. Ferrer and rookie executive producer Bill Johnston, also the Bluesfest's Cuban stage programmer.

Seven months after meeting Mr. Ferrer during a music conference in Cuba, Mr. Johnston spent \$20,000 to produce the album *Fango Dance*. The album, which features the vocals of three Ottawa-based musicians, will be released tomorrow when Mr. Ferrer plays his first of multiple Bluesfest gigs during a 10 p.m. date at the Rainbow Bistro.

"I'd never seen an electric guitarist like Ferrer before. Honestly, I don't think I've ever seen better," Mr. Johnston says of this first exposure to Mr. Ferrer's music. "It inspired me to later create my own label and produce this album."

Critics have compared Mr. Ferrer's guitar skills to those of music legends like Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan.

His extensive resumé includes performing stints with The Buena Vista Social Club and Havana Ensemble — a group of elite Cuban musicians who will also be playing at this year's festival.

But the 31-year-old guitarist remains down to earth. Mr. Ferrer is simply looking forward to his debut on a North American stage.

"Music plays such an important role in our culture and there are so many young, talented musicians here," Mr. Ferrer says through an interpreter from his home in Havana. "I feel very fortunate to have this opportunity to come to Canada and play in front of a large North American crowd."

Mr. Johnston and Mr. Ferrer have hashed out a four-year, four-album recording contract. For their first creative partnership, Mr. Ferrer wanted to produce an authentic, American blues-rock album. In order to

make the record sound authentic, Mr. Ferrer wanted North American vocalists.

It was by fluke, rather than design, that those vocalists ended up being Peter Voith, Sean Tavenier and Anders Dreup of Ottawa. The three play in a cover band called Bourbon Brothers that performs at The Highlander Pub every Wednesday night. Mr. Voith and Mr. Anders are also part of country-roots band Quarterlife, which opens for Mr. Ferrer and Kid Rock at Bluesfest on July 15.

Mr. Johnston discovered Quarterlife during a band showcase at Ottawa's Zaphods Beeblebrox nightclub, shortly before recording *Fango Dance*. Mr. Voith said he was skeptical when the newly minted producer offered to fly them to Havana.

"This guy approaches us and says 'I was just wondering if you'd like to record a record in Cuba with Cuban musicians,'" the 25-year-old Mr. Voith recalls. "Once and a while, peo-

ple tell you they want to invest in your band and it falls through, so we were a little bit cautious. But it was an enormous opportunity."

The three Canadians found Mr. Ferrer to be a gracious host, but also a workhorse.

Like all of the island's professional musicians, Mr. Ferrer was accepted into a state music academy in his home town of Sancti Spiritus at age 12. After four years of studying classical guitar, he moved to Havana to finish his senior years of education as an electric guitarist.

Mr. Ferrer said his passion for his family exceeds his music. His wife, Xylia, wrote the lyrics on one of the new album's songs and a wordless tune, often sung by his five-year-old daughter, Isabella, found its way into the album's instrumentals.

During rehearsals for the album, the Canadian contingent spent one week jamming with the Elmer Ferrer Band in Mr. Ferrer's humble Havana home. "We played our English

songs, and their guys played in your band and it falls felt each other out," Mr. Voith says. "There were egg cartons all around the inside walls to deafen the sound, and close to 15 people in a small room and the music was just unbelievable."

The second week in Havana, the Cuban-Canadian ensemble spent midnight to 8 a.m. shifts in the studio of famous island musician Silvio Rodriguez to lay down tracks for their album. What emerged from the sessions was a number of original songs, as well as Mr. Ferrer's take on two classics, *Couldn't Stand the Weather* by Stevie Ray Vaughan and *Come Together* by The Beatles.

The cover art for *Fango Dance*, a rendition of Mr. Ferrer against the backdrop of a Cuban map, was created by world-famous Cuban artist Ibrahim Miranda, who is also a friend of Mr. Ferrer's. Mr. Miranda will be in Ottawa during the festival to launch a showcase of his work at Ottawa's

ArtéSol Gallery on July 15.

Mr. Johnston says the Ottawa-based trio of musicians and Mr. Ferrer will likely collaborate on future albums. Overall, he is thankful his love of Cuban cigars exposed him to the island's music during frequent vacations over the years.

"They have 13,000 professional musicians — the most per capita of any place in the world," he says. "They are paid very little, and they have limited venues in which to perform, but they have their housing, hospital, food and school costs paid for. They're so good, because they can spend so much time dedicated to their craft."

The Elmer Ferrer band makes its festival debut at 10 p.m. tomorrow at Rainbow Bistro in Ottawa. Mr. Ferrer will appear on the Bluesfest Acoustic Days and Cuban Nights stage on Sunday at 6 p.m., July 14 at 7:30 p.m. and July 17 at 7:30 p.m. He opens for Kid Rock on the main stage on July 15 at 7:15 p.m.

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Cuatro músicos del área ayudaron al guitarrista cubano Elmer Ferrer a grabar su nuevo álbum en el pasado mes de Mayo, en La Habana. La obra tendrá su debut mañana, en el Rainbow Bistro, reporta Chris Lackner.

Chirs Lackner,

The Ottawa Citizen

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Desde el año 2002, Ottawa ha venido invitando a músicos cubanos para participar en el Bluesfest, y este año, uno de ellos reciprocó el gesto.

El guitarrista de Blues-rock Elmer Ferrer recibió en la Habana a cuatro residentes de Ottawa el pasado mes de Mayo, para participar en la grabación de su nuevo disco.

El proyecto demandaba iguales confianza tanto por parte de Ferrer como de Bill Johnston, productor ejecutivo novato, quien también colabora con el Bluesfest como programador del escenario cubano.

Siete meses después de conocer a Elmer Ferrer durante una conferencia de música en Cuba, Johnston empleó \$20,000 para producir el álbum *Fango Dance*. El disco, que presenta las voces de 3 cantantes de Ottawa, será lanzado mañana cuando Ferrer haga la primera de sus múltiples presentaciones, en el Rainbow Bistro, a las 10 p.m.

"Nunca antes vi a un guitarrista como Elmer. Honestamente, no creo haber visto uno

mejor", comenta Johnston sobre la primera vez que vió a Elmer tocar. " *Ello me inspiró a crear mi propio sello discográfico, y a producir este disco*".

La crítica ha comparado el nivel de interpretación de la guitarra de Elmer con leyendas de la música como Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughn. Su extenso currículum incluye actuaciones con Buena Vista Social Club y Havana Ensemble - un grupo élite de música cubana que también se presentará este año en el festival.

Pero el guitarrista de 31 años permanece con los pies en la tierra. Ferrer espera ansioso su debut en un escenario norteamericano.

"La música juega un papel tan importante en nuestra cultura, y hay tantos músicos jóvenes y talentosos", dice Ferrer desde su hogar en la Habana. "Me siento afortunado por tener la oportunidad de participar en este festival y tocar frente a una multitud de público norteamericano".

Para la primera creación de la sociedad Ferrer-Johnston, Elmer quería producir un auténtico disco de blues-rock americano. Para lograrlo, necesitaba cantantes norteamericanos.

Fue por azar que dichos cantantes terminaron siendo Peter Voith, Shawn Tavenier y Anders Drerup, de Ottawa. Los tres tocan en una banda de covers llamada Bourbon Brothers, que se presenta las noches de miércoles en The Highlander Pub. Voith and Anders son también parte de la banda *Quarterlife*, que el 15 de Julio abrió para Ferrer y Kid Rock en el Bluesfest.

Johnston descubrió a *Quarterlife* poco antes de comenzar a grabar Fango Dance. Peter Voith dijo haber sido escéptico cuando el productor les ofreció volar a La Habana.

"Este hombre se nos acerca y dice: ey, estaba pensando...¿les gustaría grabar un disco en Cuba con músicos cubanos?", recuerda el joven de 25 años. "Una y otra vez la gente te dice que quiere invertir en tu banda y luego fracasa, no sucede nada, así que fuimos un poco cautelosos. Pero era una oportunidad tremenda".

Los tres canadienses hallaron en Elmer a un agradable anfitrión, pero también a un trabajador infatigable.

Durante los ensayos para la grabación, el grupo de canadienses pasó una semana descargando con los integrantes de Elmer Ferrer Band en la casa de Elmer, en La Habana.

"Nosotros tocábamos nuestras canciones en inglés, y ellos tocaban su música cubana, y comenzamos a comunicarnos," dice Mr. Voith .

La segunda semana en La Habana, el ensemble cubano-canadiense empleó turnos desde la medianoche hasta las 8 de la mañana en los Estudios Abdala, para grabar los temas del álbum. El resultado fueron 7 temas originales, y dos clásicos retomados por Elmer: *Couldn't Stand the Weather* de Stevie Ray Vaughn, and *Come Together* de los Beatles.

La cubierta del disco, una imagen de Elmer Ferrer sobre un mapa de Cuba, fue creada por el mundialmente conocido artista cubano Ibrahim Miranda, quien es también amigo de Elmer. Miranda estará en Ottawa durante el festival, para presentar una exposición en la

galería ArteSol de Ottawa, el 15 de Julio.

Johnston comenta que los tres músicos de Ottawa y Elmer Ferrer colaborarán en álbumes futuros. Sobre todo, se siente agradecido de que su amor por el tabaco cubano le haya permitido descubrir la música de la isla, durante sus frecuentes vacaciones a través de los años.

Elmer Ferrer Band hará su debut en el festival mañana a las 10 de la noche, en el Rainbow Bistro, Ottawa. Mr. Ferrer aparecerá en los días acústicos del Bluesfest, y en las noches de escenario cubano, el domingo a las 6 p.m., el 14 de Julio a las 7:30 p.m., y el 17 de Julio a las 7:30 p.m.

Elmer abre para Kid Rock en el escenario principal el 15 de Julio, a las 7:15 p.m.

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