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## Gilles Peterson: Havana good time

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By Duncan Seaman

"I SAW the Wim Wenders film many years ago but that music is not what I do. It's very nice but, for me, I wanted to do something that was about my experience of Cuba; it's more about going around and being in people's houses. The music that I heard was hip-hop, reggaeton and rumba. I wanted to throw those elements into this project."

Gilles Peterson is explaining how his new double-CD, Havana Cultura, differs from Buena Vista Social Club, the 1997 movie and album that brought Cuban music to more than five million homes worldwide.

For the globetrotting BBC Radio 1 DJ, it seems

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it's something of a generational thing. Where Wenders' film and its Ry Cooder-produced soundtrack celebrated the 'son' music of old Havana, as performed by the septuagenarian likes of Reuben Gonzalez and Ibrahim Ferrer, Peterson, 45, wanted to showcase the younger musicians of today. "It was about having that jazz swing, MCs and hip-hop from Cuba," he explains.

He's pleased with "a good part" of the results, noting that the Havana Cultura Collective album has given the young talent involved an opportunity to be heard outside the Caribbean. "A lot of this stuff is not out there," he says. "There are a lot of the albums out this year to celebrate 50 years of the revolution but they are old music, there's nothing particularly fresh. I wanted this to be a statement of 2009 rather than 1959."

Originally this album was intended to be a straightforward compilation in the vein of Peterson's previous albums of music from Brazil and Africa. Then the idea expanded into Peterson producing a companion disc with local musicians. The drinks company Havana Club rum was keen to pitch in with funding but Peterson was initially sceptical. It wasn't until he discovered they shared the "same strong goals musically" that the project was green-lit.

"Havana Club is part-owned by the Cuban government with Pernod-Ricard in France. With this there's some sense of supporting the culture. To me that was very important that that was part of the game here," he explains.

An initial trip to Cuba in September 2008 led to meetings with a variety of musicians, then the credit crunch bit and whole project looked like it would be put on hold. Miraculously the money was eventually found and in June Peterson jetted over to Havana. The trip though was not without its difficulties.

"We only had 10 days to do it," he says. "Half of that time I spent doing a documentary for Radio 1 which is going to be broadcast in January. The other five days I spent in the studio with the band.

"The one thing that was very fortuitous for me was getting Roberto Fonseca on board," he continues. "He's a

reputable pianist, a great producer and a great communicator. He's also very modern in his thinking. In him I had my key catalyst Cuban person who could work everything out – from the studio to the engineer to booking the musicians. He was my saviour. Everything went through him."

Peterson had already sent Fonseca tapes of the type of music that he wanted to work on – Chekere Son by Ikarere, "the first Cuban track I discovered" was one, another was Roforofo Fight by Afrobeat legend Fela Kuti. He was, he says, "curious to experiment".

## Speed

The rest of the 12-track album comprises "tracks that were made up at the time". Speed was of the essence but because of Fonseca's connections and quality the album could be recorded at pace. "This was definitely the fastest record I've ever made," Peterson says.

"Fundamentally," he adds, "we got what we came for. We really wanted to make sure that everyone got well looked after. It's easy to go to these places and rip everyone off. Here everyone got paid. Morally it was very important for us that it was an honourable project – that's the thing that I'm most proud about."

While in Cuba Peterson says he avoided the tourist traps. "I did not even discover the old Havana tourist part, where the buildings have been done up rather dishevelled, until the last day. I was in people's flats and the back of cars, rummaging through music, meeting people."

A seasoned talent-spotter, from his days running labels such as Acid Jazz and Talkin' Loud, Peterson was immediately drawn to the singer called Danay, who was recommended by the hip-hop crew Obsesione.

"I was doing interviews for my documentary on Radio 1. They said 'you should meet our friend Danay, she's good', so I did.

"I said she reminded me of a Cuban Erykah Badu (the American R&B singer who Peterson discovered back in the 1990s]. She said, 'If anyone, I'm Jill Scott'. I liked that. I told Roberto Fonseca I had this great singer and she came to the studio. She did most things in one take. She's gorgeous, she's 21. If she can speak English she will be a superstar."

Danay is one of the performers that Peterson will be bringing to Leeds tomorrow when he performs with the Havana Cultura Collective at The Wardrobe. The show is part of a short tour backed by the Cuban rum distiller Havana Club, who will be providing concert-goers with Mojitos and frozen Daiquiris. The line-up includes top Latin DJ Lubi and local DJs Silvao and Gib.

After this Peterson has plans to continue working with Danay. "We will spend any spare minute she's got in the studio," he says. "I'm hoping this is the start of a new love affair for me."

Gilles Peterson Presents Havana Cultura: New Cuba Sound is out now on Brownswood Records. Tickets for Havana Club presents Havana Cultura featuring Gilles Peterson are available in advance from [www.havana-club.co.uk](http://www.havana-club.co.uk) or from the venue. Doors open at 10pm.[www.myspace.com/gillespeterson](http://www.myspace.com/gillespeterson)

Page 1 of 1

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