



He's not singing about a revolution

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HAVANA

It's a balmy Saturday evening in Havana's seaside Vedado neighborhood, and the grassy, tree-lined median strip at the corner of 23rd and G streets vibrates with the pulse of the city's youthful bohemia. *La farandula*, as the group of young intellectuals and artists are affectionately known, flit from nearby movie theaters to art galleries, inevitably regrouping on this corner to catch up with friends and listen to their favorite music.

Reared on Russian cartoons and revolutionary slogans - and provided a free university education if they so choose - the city's 20-and 30-somethings are worldly and questioning, especially as they bump up against social contradictions such as lack of access to the Internet and the outside world.

Surprisingly, one of the musicians who most moves Cuba's young people these days is a grandfather: veteran folk troubadour Pedro Luis Ferrer. In a richly textured baritone, and accompanying himself on the acoustic guitar, Mr. Ferrer puts the disquietude of younger generations into words.

"Rústico," the album Ferrer and his band released in the United States in April, is filled with songs like "Fundamento," in which he sings of material scarcity: "I paid for a melon yesterday/ two months' salary/ that's why sometimes/my heart bursts." Other recent albums have touched on Cuba's burgeoning prostitution problem, outgrowing the Communist party line, and the irony of living in "the Pearl of the Antilles" but being financially incapable of paying for a hotel room or a

lobster dinner - all in a uniquely Cuban style.

Gilberto Martínez, a musician and art restorer, has been a fan of Ferrer's music since age 15. "What drew me to his music was the combination of his voice, which is so melodic, and the lyrics," Martínez says. "I saw him in concert for the first time last year, and I could see how his music has matured over the years."

Born seven years before Fidel Castro's triumphant march into Havana, Ferrer grew up in a family dedicated to the Revolution. He came of age during the heady days of the island's Nueva Trova folk-music movement, and joined a rock group in the late 1960s before striking out on his own.

The decades of the 1970s and 1980s were good to Ferrer professionally. His dedication to socialism and his musical talent led to government support of his work, which allowed him to appear on television and tour abroad. His comic compositions of that era - such as the humorous folksong, "Inseminación Artificial," a cow's lament on the industrialization of Cuba's rural ways - seeped into the nation's psyche to such an extent that they became more famous than their author (or so he claims).

Economic chaos reigned across Cuba in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1989, and the societal consequences worked their way into Ferrer's compositions. Before long his critical lyrics had gotten him in trouble with the government - which owns all forms of media - and radio DJs were ordered to stop playing his music.

Ferrer's recordings disappeared from stores and eventually his music ceased to be heard in public, even, he notes, "the songs that I composed in obvious support of the Revolution."

With a family to support and a message to transmit, in the 1990s Ferrer dealt with being blacklisted from concert venues by performing in friends' yards and on rooftops. Homemade tapes of the concerts circulated like wildfire, so much so that

fans could sing along to songs which he had never recorded in a studio.

These days, Ferrer's recordings are virtually impossible to find anywhere on the island, but that doesn't stop fans like Martínez from getting hold of communally prized tapes of his music. "Whenever I found someone who had a recording, I'd jump at the opportunity to tape it," Martínez says, noting that from time to time he had to rerecord the music onto another Soviet-made cassette when the original wore out.

"It was an experience which marked me profoundly; I learned that the artist is thunder and the people are the wind," Ferrer comments. "I think that it was the best and freest manner in which my music has been distributed - without intermediaries or censorship."

Today, Ferrer is permitted to play in public on rare occasions.

Along with his three Cuban albums, Ferrer has released three albums abroad with a band that includes his daughter Lena, one of the main vocalists on his latest CD. "My collection of recordings is quite small, if you take into account how long I have been working," he says.

Ferrer's most recent album was put out by New York world music label Escondida Records, but he recorded and produced the album himself in a basement studio. To abide by the restrictions of the United States embargo on commerce with Cuba, he says that his payment for the record has been made up mostly of gifts of equipment.

In addition to the earnings from his foreign recordings, Ferrer receives a monthly paycheck of about \$20 from a government cultural institution, which is a help, he says, "It covers the electric bill."

Instead of seeing himself as a victim of censorship, Ferrer's vision of the turns his career has taken is much more nuanced.

"It was a partial censorship - some of my songs were allowed while others were not," Ferrer says, sitting on the veranda of his home in a suburban Havana neighborhood. "I decided that I did not want to be told what I could or could not sing, so I intentionally removed myself from the official circuit."

The consequences of this split were not always easy for Ferrer: money was hard to come by for years, friends and colleagues turned their backs on him, musical institutions refused to sponsor his projects or his petitions to perform abroad, and he has been visited by officials from the state security agency.

Yet Ferrer has maintained two staunch positions in the face of such difficulties. His belief in freedom of speech is stronger than ever, evidenced by the commitment with which he carries on heated political and philosophical discussions on his front porch (which is perched on a well-traveled street corner). And his commitment to his own country has not waned. When asked if he has ever thought about leaving Cuba permanently, Ferrer's answer echoes that of other intellectuals. He says simply, "Why should I? It is my country."

While other outspoken critics of the government have faced harsher consequences - 75 journalists and other dissidents were arrested en masse in March 2003 - Ferrer has been painstakingly careful with his words and actions to avoid trouble.

At the same time that he is openly critical of aspects of the government, he acknowledges Cuba's strengths, and it is clear that he is torn between hopes for the future of his country and the ideals of his Revolutionary upbringing.

Many of Ferrer's younger fans welcome this complexity, which goes beyond the often black-and-white ideology showcased on the nation's four state-run television channels. "Ferrer was almost erased from the Cuban consciousness because of his beliefs," says his fan, Gilberto Martínez. "Some people don't like his music, but I think that his criticism has been reasonable and constructive."

State support vs. free expression

Cuba's support of art since the 1959 revolution has been full of contradictions: The Socialist government has both glorified art and censored artists.

The nation's art schools educate students free of charge. After graduating, many artists are given government-sponsored positions which afford them materials, time, space, and support to show and sell their work. Artists have access to economic perks unavailable to ordinary Cubans. They are able to sell their work to tourists, and are generally able to make a living.

The most successful artists are known as The Sacred Cows because they enjoy exhibition and travel opportunities. Those whose work does not receive official approval - because it criticizes the government - find themselves censored or ignored.

While some musicians and visual artists who left the island have enhanced their careers, others have worked at entering the international market while maintaining their connection to Cuba. Due to restrictions - Cubans must request permission to leave the country, and air travel is prohibitively expensive - artists' ability to travel depends in part on their involvement with government institutions and connections abroad.

US policy toward Cuba, which includes the 1960s-era trade embargo, has affected Cuban artists. In the past two years, most visa applications for artists have been denied - a rare exception being the 43 cabaret performers who defected en masse in Las Vegas in November.

At the same time that US and global interest in Cuban arts is increasing, museums from Minnesota to California have had to contend with Cuban artists being prevented from attending their own shows.

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