

# ARTS & LIFE

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## Electric guitar seduced Cuban away from classical studies

### ADVANCED MIX OF JAZZ AND BLUES

#### Elmer Ferrer plays Friday at Mont Tremblant

CELESTE MacKENZIE  
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OTTAWA - Thirty or 40 years ago, a rock musician with dyed blond hair and a couple of silver hoop earrings would have been viewed with great suspicion in Cuba.

Back then, long hair was considered antisocial, and English-language music counterrevolutionary. But things are different now. There's a statue of John Lennon in a Havana park, and bleached-blond blues-rockers Elmer Ferrer is Cuba's best-known electric guitarist.

The Elmer Ferrer Band kicked off its current Canadian tour last week with a show at the Black Sheep Inn in Wakefield, Que. Owner Paul Symes said the show sold out, and the crowd

was left wanting more.

Ferrer performed last weekend at Ottawa's Blues Fest, and will be giving a free show at the Tremblant International Blues Festival on Friday. He also has dates lined up in Toronto, and London, Ont., and hopes to add more in August.

"His music is so far advanced - a mix of Cuban jazz with electric blues," Symes said. "When you put those two things together, it was so ridiculously fast and beautifully played ... It was almost unbelievable."

Symes said he booked the band without even hearing Ferrer's CDs. "He was highly recommended, and I am really disposed to anything Cuban. ... Along with Brazil, Ireland, Senegal and Jamaica, it has such a depth of musical culture. ...

I hire about 500 bands a year, and this one was in the top five."

Ferrer's band will be based for the summer in Ottawa, a city with which it has a special relationship. Local producer Bill Johnston put together the band's first CD, Fango Dance, after seeing Ferrer perform in Havana in 2004. And one of its four members is Ottawa vocalist Anders Drerup. In addition to playing backup guitar, Drerup sings in English, the idea being to give the band a more North American blues feel. But like just about any blues musician, Ferrer dreams of performing in the U.S., something he says is virtually impossible these days.

"Some years ago Cuban groups, musicians used to go to U.S.A. and play, but now it is almost impossible. Just one or two more famous groups can get a U.S. visa," Ferrer said between sips of Cuban espresso.

"I play blues rock, I play jazz too, and my idols of this music are almost all Americans - Pat

Metheny, John Scofield, B.B. King and Stevie Ray Vaughn. For me it would be a dream to go and see this country that has guitar in the blood and in the air."

Ferrer began studying classical guitar at age 12 at a music school in his hometown of Sancti Spiritus. At 16 he enrolled at Havana's National School of Arts to continue classical studies. Soon afterwards, he saw the film *Crossroads*, about a classical guitarist who wants to become a blues musician.

"I saw the electric guitar player in the movie, and I enjoyed it far too much, and it made me switch to electric and popular guitar," Ferrer said.

He began studying electric guitar on his own during his spare time because it wasn't yet taught in any Havana music school. These days, in addition to his own band, Ferrer collaborates with other young Cuban stars like Yusa, Roberto Fonseca, and Maraca, and he teaches. He was also part of *Interactivo*, the

group whose CD *Goza Pepillo* won the 2006 grand prize at Cubadisco, Cuba's version of the Junos. Strong government support for the arts in Cuba means the 32-year-old has been able to study and work full-time as a musician.

"The only thing I do is play. I have time to do my own music. Playing with other musicians is something I love to do because you can refresh and you can change. Sometimes you are playing rock 'n' roll, sometimes on a pop CD, then you refresh and then play on a salsa CD."

Still, musicians are paid Cuban salaries of about \$20 a month (and their basic food is subsidized), so performance fees and CD sales overseas can be a big boost to artists - even though the Cuban government takes a cut of concert ticket sales.

Elmer Ferrer plays a free show at the Tremblant International Blues Festival Friday at 7 p.m. on the Volkswagen Stage.



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Elmer Ferrer is based in Ottawa for the summer.