

# Cuban musician rocks

## Elmer Ferrer kicks off Canadian tour

BY CELESTE MACKENZIE

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

Back then, long hair was considered anti-social, and English-language music counter-revolutionary. But things are different now. There's a statue of John Lennon in a Havana park, and bleach-blond blues-rocker Elmer Ferrer is Cuba's best-known electric guitarist.

The Elmer Ferrer Band kicked off its Canadian tour this week with a sold-out show at the Black Sheep Inn in Wakefield, and Ferrer will make three appearances at Bluesfest.

"His music is so far advanced — a mix of Cuban jazz with electric blues," said Black Sheep Inn owner Paul Symes. "When you put those two things together, it was so ridiculously fast and beautifully played to the point it was almost unbelievable ... 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.

"Just one or two more famous groups can get a U.S. visa," said Ferrer, drinking Cuban espresso.

"I play blues rock, I play jazz



**Elmer Ferrer is Cuba's best-known electric guitarist.**

Bluesfest is at the Festival Plaza, at Elgin and Laurier, through July 16. For info: [www.ottawabluesfest.ca](http://www.ottawabluesfest.ca).

Passes and daily tickets at the gate, or through Capital Tickets, 599-3267 or [www.capitaltickets.ca](http://www.capitaltickets.ca).

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 Sanctus Spiritus. At 16 he enrolled at Havana's National School of Arts to continue classical studies. Soon after he saw the film *Crossroads*, about a classical guitarist who wants to become a blues musician.

"I studied one year, and the next year 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.

Hooked, he began studying electric guitar on his own during his spare time. Although the prejudice against rock had basically passed, there was no school yet for electric guitar in Havana.

These days, in addition to his own band, Ferrer collaborates with other young Cuban stars such as Yusa, Roberto Fonseca, and Maraca, and 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 and 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 buy subsidized basic food), 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. The financial importance of touring abroad, however, is something Ferrer is uncomfortable talking about.

Having done shows abroad for more than 10 years, Ferrer says that touring is the most important thing in a musician's career.

"Your CDs are travelling the whole world, but (touring) is the only way the people can see you play. It is the real thing — they are not only listening to you, they are seeing you."

**Elmer Ferrer** plays the Bluesfest main stage today at 5:30 p.m., The Black Sheep Stage tomorrow at 7:45 p.m. with Maraca, and the Blues 'Til Dusk Stage on July 16 at 4:15 p.m.