

Elmer Ferrer

Cuba's Hot Guitar Hand

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Guitarist and composer Elmer Ferrer is one of the most active studio musicians in Cuba. When he first dedicated himself to music, he was one of just a handful of Cuban electric guitar players. Since then, he has become a professor at the school where he studied both classical and electric guitar, toured internationally, and appeared on several soundtracks and over 60 CDs.

His flexible and eclectic style includes acoustic folk, blues, hard rock, and electric jazz... a diverse mix of different things, or as they say in Cuba, "tremendo arroz con mango."

He was gracious enough to grant Rocket Sounds this exclusive interview, following the release of his new CD, Fango Dance.



 Musician's Friend
POWER SEARCH

Photo by Iván Soca

RS: *Elmer, congratulations on the release of your second CD, Fango Dance. It is awesome!*

EF: Thanks a lot! I'm glad you like it.

RS: *What is your background and how did you come to be a guitar player?*

EF: I was born in Sancti Spíritus, one of the central provinces of Cuba, which always had a very rich musical environment. My mother is a musician too, and when I was a kid, I was surrounded by music all the time. I have a sister and a brother, and the three of us are all professional musicians. I used to sing at school and theaters when I was a kid and always liked the sound of the guitars. That was the instrument that captured my attention, and that was the

reason I started to study classical guitar at 12. I studied for 8 years, but the first time I listened to Pat Metheny, John McLaughlin, John Scofield, and others, when I was around 13 years old, the electric guitar blew my mind. At 16, I started to study electric guitar on my own. My first guitar was a Lead Star my parents bought at a consignment shop in my home town. I kept studying classical guitar in school because there was no school for electrics.

RS: How did you come to hear guys like John McLaughlin and Pat Metheny when you were 13 years old? That is pretty sophisticated stuff!

EF: In my home town, at that time, we had no information about guitar players or music like this. So, when the teachers who studied in Havana played this kind of music, it was the only reference we had. In that sense, I guess the lack of information helped.

RS: In the US, people probably are not even aware of the music scene in Cuba. What is it like to be a musician playing in Cuba nowadays?

EF: That is a bit complicated to explain. Even though there are many musicians in Cuba, there are not many places where you can play. And in those few places, you don't have really good conditions. It's almost impossible to promote a CD playing live, or to give concerts. By the time you finish paying to play, renting sound equipment, lights, and transportation, you don't make a penny—even when the audience is huge! In the end, you do concerts just for the personal need to play, because you want to and need to. And of course for your audience. That's why most Cuban musicians, those who have the opportunity, of course, tour and give concerts more outside Cuba than inside.

RS: Are there many musicians in Cuba? What are the major styles?

EF: There are many, many musicians here. The mix of Spanish people and African slaves that were brought to Cuba, and also being so close to the United States, worked really well for music. Our roots made our music rich. Cuban people have a great sense of rhythm, and we have a lot of excellent musicians. The main style is "timba," also called "salsa."

RS: What do you call your style and how did you develop it? Did you ever take lessons?

EF: I'd say it is a mix of blues, rock, jazz, and also "guajiro" and Trova Espirituana. The way I see it, the last two have a lot in common with blues, in terms of the feeling. I guess my style is all these put together, plus all the music I've liked and studied. I studied classical guitar for 8 years (4 at Elementary School of Sancti Spiritus, and 4 at the National School of Arts, in Havana). I studied electric guitar last year at the National School of Arts.

RS: Name some of your guitar heroes? What other musicians influence your style?

EF: Scott Henderson, Pat Metheny, John Scofield, Steve Ray Vaughan, Joe Satriani. Maybe not in a direct way, but my style has also been influenced by musicians that play other instruments, like Wayne Shorter, Joe Zawinul, and many more.

RS: Great collection of heroes! Do artists like that ever come to Cuba?

EF: No, never. I was lucky to see Scott Henderson in Argentina, Joe Satriani in Mexico, and during the Tokyo Jazz Festival in 2004, I met Steve Lukather, one of my guitar heroes.

RS: Who are you listening to now?

EF: SRV, Jeff Beck, Alejandro Sanz, Sting, Greg Howe.

RS: Do you have any difficulties getting current music in Cuba?

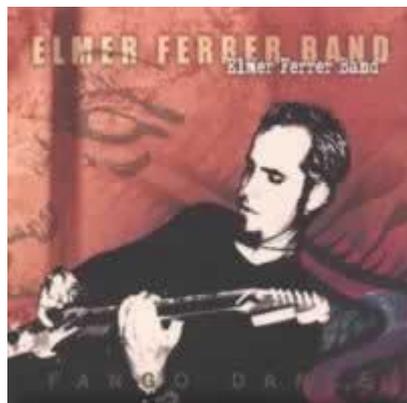
EF: Some things are hard to find, because they aren't distributed here. A lot of the music I listen to comes from other musicians. We lend each other CDs.

RS: *Is it difficult finding other musicians to collaborate with?*

EF: No, it isn't difficult. In fact, we often collaborate on each other's projects. It often happens between musicians from different generations. For example, I've played, toured and recorded with Santiago Feliú, an outstanding figure in the Cuban songwriting scene, and also worked with Ernán López-Nussa, a great, world-renowned jazz piano player. I have been lucky to record a number of CDs as a session musician, for both Cuban and foreign artists. It's not hard to find musicians to collaborate with, but it depends on the music you want to make. For example, for Fango Dance, we really wanted blues vocals, something impossible to find in Cuba. My manager and friend Billy Johnston, who lives in Ottawa, brought three Canadian singers to Cuba for my latest CD, Fango Dance.

RS: *Are there many professional recording studios? How about home recording?*

EF: Not really, but we do have some good studios— Abdala Studios, for example. They are well-equipped for both analog and digital, including Pro Tools. There are also many home studios, using software such as Nuendo and Cubase.



RS: *Where was the recording done for Fango Dance?*

EF: It was recorded in Studio 3 at Abdala Studios, and PM Records, another good studio in Havana. Some guitars were recorded in my home where I have a small, humble studio.

RS: *You make some great sound in that "humble" studio!*

EF: Well, it's not really a studio, just a room at my home.

RS: *What is your home computer set-up for recording?*

EF: My home computer setup is a Mac G5, Pro Tools HD, Genelec Monitors, a Neve Console.... just kidding! I have a Compaq PC, Nuenedo 2.2, an M-Audio Delta 1010 sound card, an Audio Buddy, Yamaha MSP 5 monitors, and some mics.

RS: *Was Fango Dance recorded analog or digital?*

EF: It was recorded digital, some parts in Pro Tools others in Nuendo. We mixed in Digital Performer. Like we say in "Cubano" when you have a mix of different things, "tremendo arroz con mango". Literally translated that means something like "a tremendous rice with mango"!

This interview is continued in [Part 2](#).

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Elmer Ferrer

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RS: *How did the Fango Dance CD come together?*

EF: In November 2004, Billy Johnston, who produced the Cuban stage at the Blues Fest in Ottawa, saw my band, EFB, play at Abdala Studios. A few months later, he offered to produce my record. We wanted a blues-rock album, and I already had some tunes composed. We started recording in May 2005. Most of the musicians I had worked with for years: Juan Pablo Domínguez on bass, Amhed Mitchel on drums, Alexis Bosch on piano, and Jaldan Ruiz on percussions. We all worked together for years as part of Habana Ensemble, a Cuban Latin jazz band. We know each other, and it's comfortable to work together. We often do productions for other musicians and songwriters with this same group. They are really good. For the CD, we also needed some vocals, and Billy Johnston found Anders Drerup, Shawn Tavenier and Peter Voith, who contributed to the recording as guest artists.



Photo by Iván Soca

RS: *Kudos to Billy Johnston for recognizing your talent!*

EF: Thanks! I'd like Billy to say something...

BJ: What can I say, it is all about producing quality music that I like, and I love Elmer's tone. He is a great producer with fantastic instinct. Enuf from me, back to Elmer.

RS: *Great rhythm section! The band sounds very tight. Was everything recorded live or tracked separately?*

EF: Some tunes were recorded with all of us playing together. In others, we would play together, but only keep the bass. The rest of the tracks were added later.

RS: *On this CD, did you do most of the writing? How do you write and put a song together?*

EF: Yes, I did all the music, except the two covers, of course. For composing, I don't take any technical method as a guide. An idea simply comes up, and I start to develop it, trying different ways. Sometimes I get a tune in the blink of an eye; other times it's a longer. I enjoy composing a lot. On "Crazy Window", the lyrics were written by my wife Xyrla, who is a writer and also works with me as producer. She was writing "Crazy" as a poem for kids. I read it and liked it for a tune I was working on. We worked together, exchanged some ideas, and adjusted the verses to the music. Later, the Canadian singers helped check the language and make some retouches. "Crazy Window" by the way is a real window in our home. I already had 5 or 6 tunes finished when I received the proposal for recording Fango Dance, and I worked full time to finish the rest.

RS: Okay, I have to ask. Why the Beatles tune "Come Together"?

EF: It's a Beatles song I always liked. We were already playing it in live shows before the CD as an instrumental.

RS: What is your setup? Guitars, amps, effects, strings?

EF: I play a Fender Standard Strat, made in Mexico, with DiMarzio Virtual Vintage 2.2 pickups, through a Fender Twin. Pedals include a Retro Sonic Compressor, Maxon SD-9 distortion, Ibanez Tube Screamer Overdrive Pro 808, MXR Double Shot Distortion, Xotics RC Booster, Roger Mayer Voodoo-1, Line 6 DL 4 Delay, Arion Chorus Sch-1, Crybaby GCB-95 Wah, and a Boss FV300H Volume. I like D'Addario XL .010 - 0.046 strings, and Fender Heavy picks.



Photo by Iván Soca

RS: What difference do you see between the Maxon SD-9 and the Tube Screamer? Do you ever use them together?

EF: The Maxon SD-9 has more gain and less mids than the Tube Screamer 808. The Tube Screamer is bluesier, while the SD-9 is more rockin'. Live, I sometimes use both pedals together at the end of a solo. But you have to close your volume fast, because feedback comes immediately. On the "Fango Dance" CD, I used both pedals together on "E-blues", with the gain closed on the SD-9. I used it more like a booster, because I liked the "color" and the strength it added to the Tube Screamer.

RS: Can you explain what the Xotics RC Booster does for your sound?

EF: I use it to change the color in some specific songs, and also to distort the amp's clean channel a bit. It gives a clean overdrive sound that really works for some stuff.

RS: Your tone on this cd is simply amazing! Rich, round, thick and juicy. How do you get your Magical Guitar Tone?

EF: For the CD, I mainly used the Fender Twin amp, the Tube Screamer Pedal, the Maxon SD-9 and the RC Booster. I placed two Shure SM-57 mics in the center of each speaker cone. On some tunes, one mic went direct to the board, totally dry. The other mic went through an Avalon preamp and a Rocktron Intellifex, for reverb and delay. A lot of guitars were recorded at home with the same set up. Thanks for the "Magical Guitar Tone"!

RS: The Avalon preamp rocks! Did you choose that specifically or was that just what was available?

EF: It was the only one available at the studio, but it's really good. For guitar tracks I recorded at home, I replaced it with an Audio Buddy from M-Audio.

RS: *Any difficulty getting gear in Cuba?*

EF: A lot of difficulty. Here you cannot even find electric guitar strings. We have to take the opportunity when touring outside Cuba to come home with a lot of strings and other gear. Get it when you can.

RS: *That must be frustrating! Are you able to mail order things like tubes and strings? Software updates?*

EF: Nope!

RS: *Are there many venues to play in Cuba?*

EF: Not for this kind of music. We have a few venues in Havana, but you get paid so little, that when you get a taxi home, all your pay is gone. You can't afford to do this very often.

RS: *Any difficulties touring outside Cuba?*

EF: Sometimes, due to red tape. We have to follow a large proceeding, and sometimes it causes delays. I don't know why. But we do tour. A lot of Cuban musicians tour outside, which is really the best way to promote a band's work.

RS: *You have a new website at <http://www.elmerferrer.com/>.*

EF: You can hear clips off the new CD, and also see video clips from a live DVD called Jazz Cuba Today. The video is from a show we did in Ottawa.

RS: *Is your first CD, Metropoli, still available?*

EF: Yes, it is. You can find it on the internet at <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/elmerferrer> or <http://www.nlstore.nl/>.

RS: *What is next for you, Elmer?*

EF: Keep playing and supporting Fango Dance. I'm also composing, studying, working on my guitar sound and future productions. Right now I'm working on two CDs as musical producer.

RS: *Good luck, Elmer. We'll hope to see you in the States one day. Or at least on an EFB concert DVD!*

EF: I'd love that, man!

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