

Often, when he's back in Havana, Juan de Marcos González likes to stroll in the capital's enormous Lenin Park, with its lake and high trees and giant statue of the famous Marxist revolutionary, and reflect on how well the space would host a Glastonbury-style festival of Cuban music.

"It's only the established Cuban bands that get to tour internationally," says the bespectacled 57-year-old, his trademark dreadlocks more silver than when he kick-started the Buena Vista Social phenomenon in the late 90s and directed the line-up of elderly maestros during their one-off concerts in New York and Amsterdam. "But Cuban music is evolving daily. Street poets and rappers are mixing spoken word with Afro-Cuban jazz. Reggaeton is merging with timba. There is a lot of talent coming out of the conservatories."

"International audiences connect immediately with Cuban music," he adds in his accented English. "They understand its authenticity despite cultural differences. But while the Buena Vista recordings and tours reintroduced Cuban music to the world – and I'm talking about the real project that ended with the deaths of the original featured artists, not the fake Buena Vistas that are continuing to make money for music promoters – they only offered a partial vision of what's going on inside Cuba. Even when you visit you won't see all of it. A lot of the scene is underground."

González should know. Though he now lives in Mexico, where he has grandchildren and where his adult daughters are studying music, he is in a privileged position of being able to come and go from his birthplace. Havana is where he studied classical guitar and orchestral conducting and later gained a doctorate in hydraulic engineering; where he co-founded the legendary *son* group Sierra Maestra in the 70s and with his signature 13-piece Afro-Cuban All Stars (and scores of special guests) recorded the Grammy-nominated *A Toda Cuba Le Gusta* in 1996.

"That release was a tribute to the classic Cuban sound of the 50s," says González, a genial but outspoken auteur often described as Cuban music's most important contemporary figure. "In later albums [such as 2005's Grammy-nominated *Step Forward* [reviewed in #30], released on González's now defunct DM Ahora! label] I expanded to include other Cuban genres: *son-montuno*. Timba. Danzon. Chachachá. Mambo. Batumbata. Afro-Cuban jazz. More."

Featuring the likes of veteran lead singer Evelio Galan, respected *conguero* Rolando 'El Niño' Mentira, keyboard/vibes



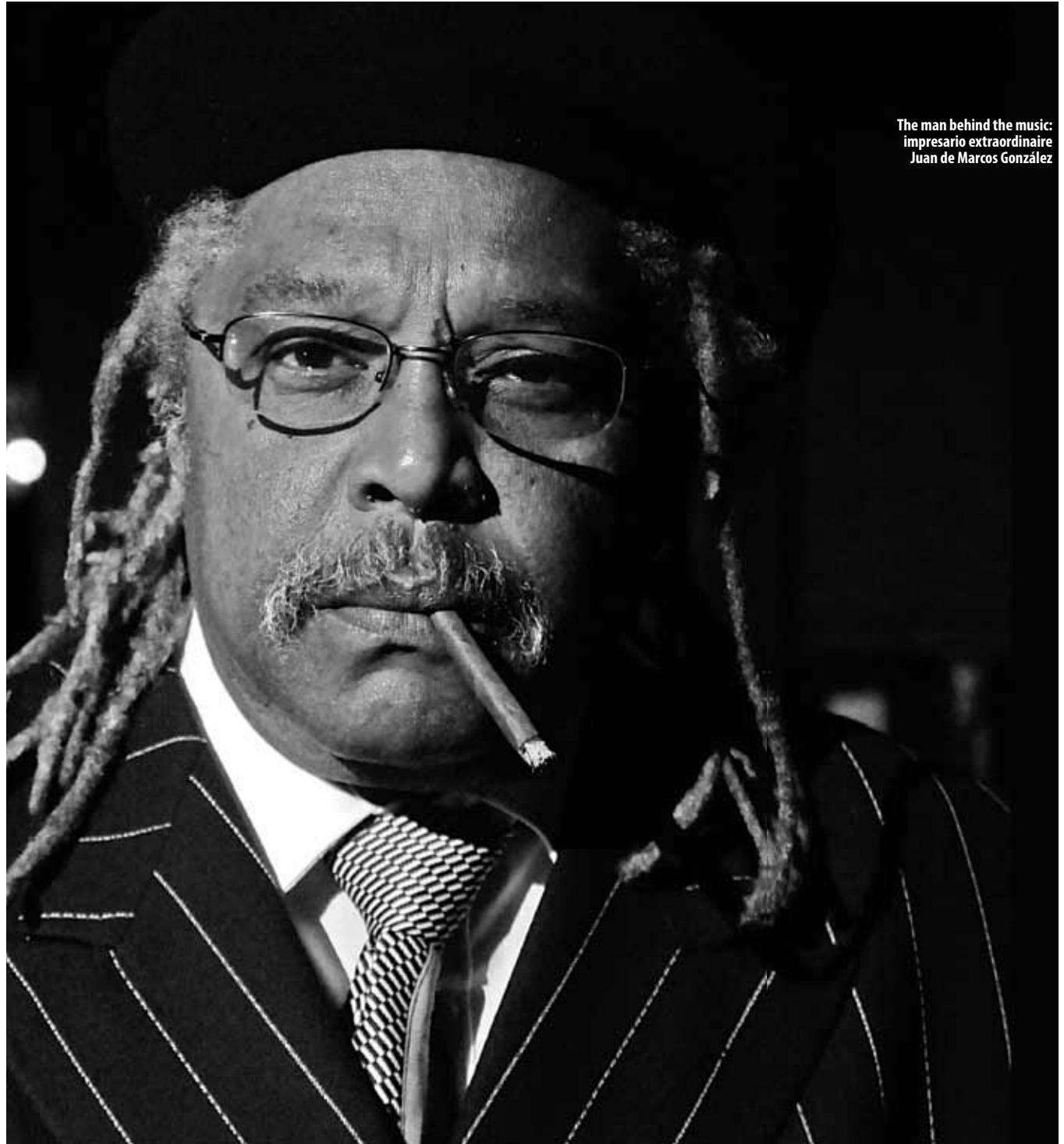
Juan de Marcos González with his wife and daughters

NICOLAS SWITALSKY

CUBA Juan de Marcos González is one of the most influential men in Cuban music, making his name with the Buena Vista Social Club, Sierra Maestra and the Afro-Cuban All Stars. He speaks candidly to Jane Cornwell about the state of Cuban music

THE CUBAN STATE OF AFFAIRS

PORTRAIT JOA



The man behind the music:
impresario extraordinaire
Juan de Marcos González

player Glicerio González and clarinettist Laura González (Juan de Marcos' daughters), and with bandleader González on vocals and *tres* guitar, a new version of the Afro-Cuban All Stars started touring internationally in 2009. Their forthcoming show at the Barbican – as part of La Linea, the London Latin music festival – will be the first time they've graced the UK in seven years.

"Our recent reviews have been excellent!" A grin. "Our repertoire highlights the diversity of Cuban music and mixes great national standards with compositions by myself and other band members. We're bringing a show that lets people forget the bad moments of life and sees them leaving happier than when they went in."

González is rightly proud of the fact that ACAS command international payment rates wherever they play, which is largely due to the fact that most members either own another passport or live outside the island. That Cuba has managed to withstand the US blockade for 52 years is of course remarkable – but visit the Disney-fied Old Havana or the beach resort of Varadero and you'll find talented ensembles playing for a pittance in the lobbies of hotels they're forbidden entry into. If Cuban artists want to play abroad, if they want to cash in on the BVSC brand, who can really blame them?

But while the Obama administration has relaxed the previous Bush administration's draconian restrictions on cultural exchange – over 50 ensembles have been gigging across the US since the end of 2009 – they are still only paid per diems, not fees.

"America still doesn't want to be seen to support 'Castro's dictatorship,'" says González. "Even though everybody knows that almost all Cubans hide their money from the authorities. The law explicitly prohibits Cuban citizens from being paid for their services so promoters – and many of them were born in Cuba – are buying quality music at insulting prices, often via murky arrangements with officials of the Cuban cultural institutions. It's the same in Europe and elsewhere too. What's sad is that the musicians accept in the hope that things will get better."

"It's not just live events," he adds with a sigh. "American institutions won't pay copyright fees either. For example, the family of Rafael Ortiz and Sergio Siaba [composers of the songs 'Amor de Loca Juventud' and 'El Cuarto de Tula' on the 1997 World Circuit album *Buena Vista Social Club*] never got a penny from their relevant royalties because the authors signed contracts before 1959." (World Circuit's Nick Gold, he adds, paid where he could "down to the last cent").

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"International audiences connect immediately with Cuban music. They understand its authenticity despite cultural differences"

It was González's wife Glicerio Abreu (a percussionist in the current ACAS line-up) who personally gathered the musicians for the famous BVSC sessions at Havana's EGREM Studios in 1996. Just as it was Juan de Marcos González who directed them. With the ensuing brouhaha that saw American guitarist Ry Cooder, the album's producer, and German film maker Wim Wenders, who made the 1999 documentary, hailed internationally as the two men (three if one counts Nick Gold) driving the project, did González ever feel sidelined? Resentful?

He shakes his head. "I've never felt that way. I've an ego, as everyone has, but it is more intellectual, more to do with what I've tried to contribute to Cuban culture than about fame or recognition."

"I think Ry thinks similarly. I remember when the Afro-Cuban All Stars original line-up – later called Buena Vista – were about to perform in a salsa festival at the Hollywood Bowl. The remarkable sound engineer Jon Fausty (Fania Records) approached Ry, who I'd invited to play a solo, and congratulated him on the success of the BVSC album. Ry said thanks but then a few seconds later, clearly to himself, said, 'But it's not my album'."

"This is true. The album was the old guys' magnum opus. The rest of them were merely contributors. Ten years before that, Sierra Maestra made the first attempt to revive traditional Cuban music [*son*] and unbelievably became the most popular ensemble in Cuba, which is a very competitive country in terms of music. This was the first step towards the existence of the Buena Vista Social Club. So I'm very proud of what I've had a chance to do," says González. "Very satisfied."

González has other projects under his signature beret: three albums will be released in the coming year on an as-yet undisclosed label. He's just finished editing a live DVD of the ACAS Live at Mexico's Cervantino Festival last October. And while there won't be any Glasto-style event in Lenin Park just yet ("The government still has to feed its people; a festival like this would need private investment and sponsorship"), González is working on a touring project that will, as is his wont, set a precedent.

"A Cuban opera," he says. "A Cuban opera featuring a symphonic orchestra – Cuban symphonic music is great but almost unknown worldwide – and timba, *guarapachangeo* [contemporary rumba] and *son montuno* ensembles."

If he's basing a character on himself, he's not saying. "A Cuban opera that tells the history of my generation," he adds, eyes twinkling, "with all our frustrations and successes." ■



All four generations of the Afro-Cuban All Stars performing at Pittsburgh Town Hall, in 2011

DATE The Afro-Cuban All Stars play at the Barbican as part of La Linea on April 25. See the Gig Guide for details