Havana

The isle is full of noises

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Our correspondent enjoys the twilight of Castro's Cuba

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HOW does music jump the Muzak gap? Hearing a song for the first time can be magical; the second time better still; a few more listens and it becomes a friend of sorts. But then it becomes the sort of friend you'd

rather not see. It is still, at a certain level, fundamentally good, but it is also very annoying. Name anybody who doesn't feel that way about, say, “Hotel California”. Even some of the very best Cuban music has passed the point where you can hear it without wincing slightly.

For much of that over-familiarity we can thank “Buena Vista Social Club”, a collection of music from veteran Cuban artists brought together by Ry Cooder, an American roots and folk guitarist, in 1996. It inspired a documentary film by Wim Wenders tracing the musicians

from their modest lives in Havana to triumphant concert appearances in Amsterdam and New York. The album, the film, the film soundtrack and numerous spin-offs made “Buena Vista” a world-wide phenomenon. Several of the musicians have since died—Compay Segundo three years ago at the age of 95, Ibrahim Ferrer last year at the age of 78—but the brand has become so strong that the surviving artists continue to use it.

In the tourist quarters of Old Havana it can seem at times as if every Cuban with a guitar has come out to sing the songs that

Buena Vista made famous. It's as if you were to go to Liverpool and find bands singing Beatles songs on every street corner.

Corbis

Rumba or possibly rhumba

But this tourist trade does little justice to the range of music you can hear by listening a bit harder. Isolated as Cuba may be in other ways, globalisation has pushed

and pulled its music in all sorts of directions, old and new. It is not only the traditional influence of Africa that is significant, but of rap and hip-hop and reggaeton, punk and hard rock, strains of folk music and jazz, and the ubiquitous salsa—which Cubans have turned into an edgy and innovative variant called *timba*.

Yesterday I went to see a rhumba band. Or possibly a rumba band. There is some dispute as to whether Cuban rhumba is the same thing as ballroom rumba, and whether they deserve the same spelling, but there is no dispute that rhumba came to

Cuba with the slave trade. It is dancing music—sometimes for men alone, sometimes for men and women. For a time under communism it was something of an underground phenomenon: the African roots were a bit too strong for the regime, which disapproved of the sexually suggestive dances. But attitudes have become more accommodating, towards both naughty rhythms and African roots. The performance I saw was in an official musician's union building, and the singing was in Yoruba.

A few days back I heard a friend's band play salsa and jazz on the

roof of his house. The neighbourhood seemed an average middle-class Havana mix—which is to say, quite poor. The stairs leading up to the roof were made of poured cement. A big television in one of the downstairs rooms was the only sign of purchasing power. When we went down to dinner it was salad, chicken, rice and beans, but not enough to feed everyone at table. This was not a home of people who were starving, but one where the ends only barely met.

The band had three vocalists, singing simple lyrics over

complicated rich percussion. All the members had studied music. Those from outlying provinces still awaited the paperwork they needed to make them legal residents of the capital. My friend was the manager. He told me that for a successful show at a tourist hotel in Varadero (Cuba's Cancun, a few hours east of Havana on the island's northern coast) they could get $50 per musician—around three times the average Cuban's official salary.

This is one big reason why Havana remains, more than most, a city full of music. In the United States or western Europe music is

a winner-take-all industry where a successful few make a lot of money and the rest work for love. In Cuba, a lot of verve and ambition is always going to help, but music is basically a job with better than average prospects of earning a living and making some hard currency.

As the sun went down we stayed on the roof, drinking more rum. The practice was over but the music was not. A girl kept singing while the rest of us supplied a beat by tapping on pipes and walls. The song was a lament, after which the singer broke into a broad smile. You could see her

point. What could be sadder, and yet what could be happier, than to be a musician, on a poor rooftop, in Havana?

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Tuesday

GUY comes home from work early. Walks upstairs, finds his wife, looking uncomfortable and sweaty, hiding beneath the sheets. He's suspicious, takes a look around—and finds his best friend hiding in the closet. "Jim, what are you doing here?" he shouts. "Well," his friend replies,

"everybody has to be somewhere."

And that's how I felt standing on the stage of one of the more famous cabarets in Havana, delivering improvised remarks to a hundred or so members of what proved to be Cuba's high society. I owed this distinction to a friend of a friend, a local politician, who was in turn a friend of the woman giving the party at this *peña* (club). She it was who got up between songs to say that there was a foreign visitor among the guests and would he care to say a few words. Everybody has to be somewhere.

This somewhere was in Vedado, just west of the city's historic centre, a posh district filled with government offices, smart hotels, and some of the city's better restaurants. The nondescript entrance on a side street gave way to a reassuring gloom that made you think the hour was later than it was—a prudent tactic, when the entertainment can begin at five in the afternoon, and when much of the decor has seen better days. It is not as smoky as you might expect, because, even here, people don't have a whole lot of money for cigarettes. In

Cuba chain-smoking is less a vice than an extravagance.

It's not what I had planned on doing. Quiet interviews with some of these people would have served me much better.

Going around the room, my friend pointed out who was who among the crowd: here a famous singer, there an influential writer in the Cuban press. I should have been listening to them. Instead I was talking, and delivering the usual platitudes about what an honour it was to be honoured to by their invitation, a wonderful city, a

fascinating moment to be studying the political situation.

As Janet Malcolm once wrote, “Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible”, so let that be my excuse if I go on to tell you some not very nice things about these people who were very nice to me, and my only excuse is that they are true.

We fed on sandwiches that were morally indefensible in themselves. There was some sort of meatish substance slapped

together with either cheese or mayonnaise and stuffed between thick slices of bread that were half air and half stale. This was how the relatively well-off ate.

I labour the point about the sandwiches, because the easiest way to describe the music is to say that it sounded pretty much like the sandwich tasted. Even in Havana, the music can be bad.

The acts that evening were singers performing over backing vocal tracks, as in some version of “American Idol”. The songs were as saccharine as those on the American television show,

lyrics of love and loss that moved the spirit even less when delivered by a man of mature years in a yellow jacket and purple shirt.

I reassured my friend that I was having a good time. To prove it, I even bought a few CDs.

AFP

Feeling the city breaking

The last song of the night was a cringe-inspiring cover of the Bee Gees' classic “Stayin' Alive”, half-shouted in falsetto by a man resembling an Albanian truck driver. The dance floor filled up. I hesitate to suggest that the

performer had Fidel Castro in mind when he chose the song, but, lo and behold, the words did fit uncannily well.

Fidel no longer does much walking, but when he did—to judge from the rumours flitting about the room of just how many of these greying grandees had once been *queridas* (“beloved”, or, as we might say, girlfriends) of the leader—he was indeed a lady's man.

And whatever it was that the Bee Gees had in mind when they sang about the “*New York Times*' effect on man”, that newspaper

certainly had its effect on Mr Castro, who used to micro-examine his coverage in the foreign press.

The closing stanza of the song repeats the cry of “somebody help me, yeah”. Failing which, it is a matter of stayin' alive and, as the Bee Gees put it, “feelin' the city breakin'.”

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Monday

I ONCE had a long argument with a colleague about modern

advertising. I found its catchphrases empty and ugly. The suggestion that Nike might somehow help you “Do it”, whatever “it” was, seemed to me antithetical to any notion of a life well-lived. She thought “branding” an addition to the sum of human happiness.

So I was probably better-disposed towards Cuba than she might have been. I didn't immediately notice the absence of billboards insisting that I would be happier wearing this shirt or drinking that cola. What struck me instead, as I rode from the airport to the centre of Havana, were the

billboards proclaiming, “long live the Revolution”, and with pictures of the late Che Guevara below the slogan “forever”, and variations thereof.

In their emptiness and impossibility—Che no more enriches the life of the average Cuban today than Abercrombie & Fitch turns its customers into nymph-like models—these posters seemed to me another exercise in branding. They might linger in the memory longer than a McDonald's poster, but perhaps that was merely their novelty. As with a branding campaign in the West, the publicity had long since parted

company with the limitations of the underlying product.

Cuba is not wholly without consumer-goods advertising, it just has much less of it. As I write I am looking at a neon sign, in the form of a lifebelt, promoting Havana Club, which is quite a nice rum. There is a choice of beers. But there is only one, local, cola. And if the places in the world are few where one does not find a choice between Coke and Pepsi, that testifies not to the power of the Cuban system, but to the power of the American one.

Cuba famously lies 90 miles from the Florida coast. But it seems farther from America than anywhere else I've been on any of five continents. Some cultural influence crosses the strait: when I introduce myself, young Cubans mention a recent Keanu Reeves film that shares my name—and which was, frankly, rather terrible. But still, there is less America here than almost anywhere else in the world. It is an absence of America so strong that it requires a joint-venture of sorts between the American and Cuban governments to keep it in place. Cuba's otherness stems as

much from America's wilful embargo as it does from any policies of the Cuban state; and it is America, not Cuba, which has insisted on Cuba's isolation.

Poverty has gone hand in hand with this isolation. But try to sort out how much of it has been due to the American embargo, and how much to Cuban policies, and you will quickly get lost. Unless, that is, you have embarked on the search with a well-drawn road map of ideological preconceptions.

I would prefer to draw my own map, but this is a frustrating place to go exploring. I've been to

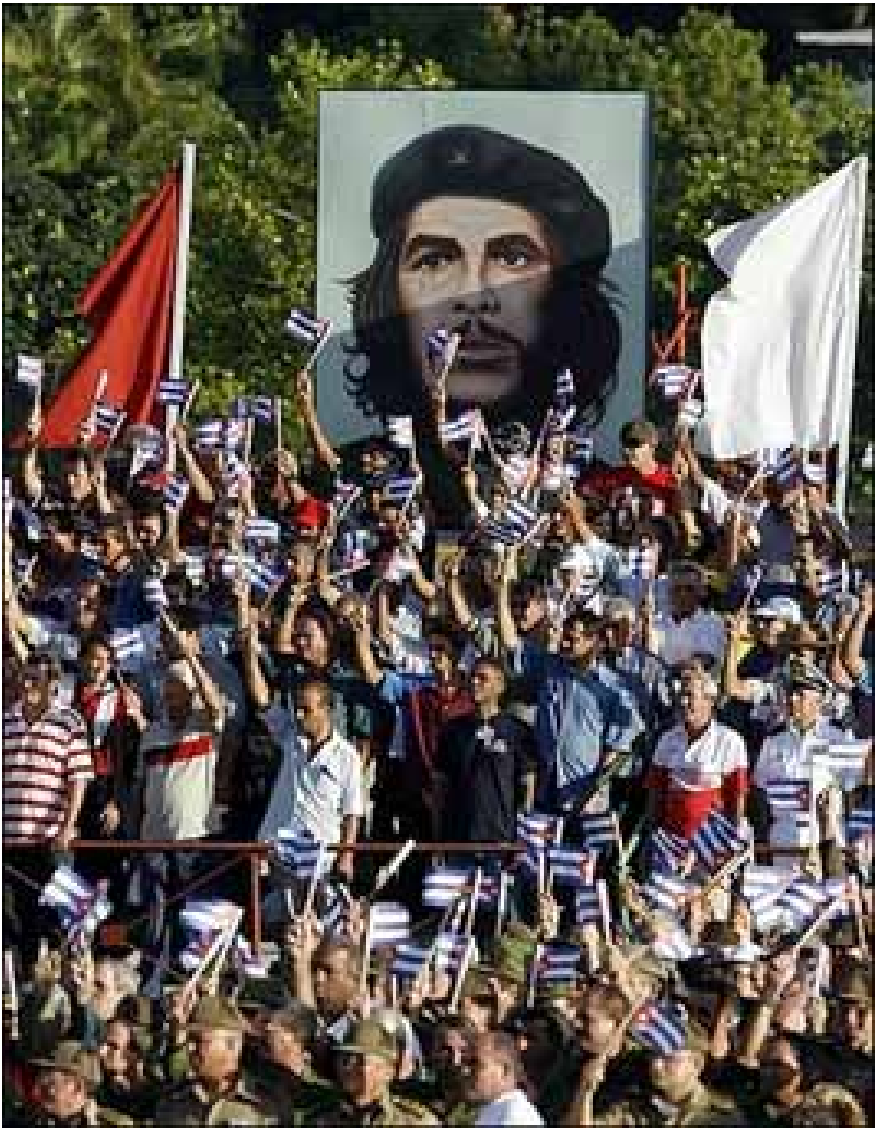
see presidents and ministers in other countries equipped with no more than a business card and a polite if sometimes persistent telephone manner. In Cuba my calls are met with equally polite and persistent requests to call again tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, for the duration of my stay. This would be easier to take if I had not first spent six months awaiting a visa to enter the country, on the grounds that this was the time needed to set up meetings for me once I got to Havana.

It will be difficult for me to answer my colleagues' questions about

who is up and who is down in the power struggles, and what will happen when Fidel Castro, who is clearly very ill, dies. And perhaps the government might have equal difficulty answering my own

AFP

questions on those same subjects.



Semper Fidel's

My visa arrived in time for me to watch the annual celebration of the Cuban revolution on December 2nd. There had been some earlier talk that President Castro might appear; he did not. We made do with a military parade of tanks, armoured troop carriers, rocket launchers, aeroplanes and helicopters, all converging on the Plaza of the Revolution and diverging again.

At the centre of the day, and of the march, was Fidel's younger brother, Raul, the country's provisional ruler. In contrast to Fidel's famous hours-long speeches, Raul spoke only briefly.

He told a crowd of hundreds of thousands or more, filling the plaza and surrounding streets, that “war is not the answer.” But what was the question? A few minutes later trucks laden with surface-to-air missiles paraded down the pothole-chocked avenues, presumably just in case war turned out to be the answer after all.

In the morning before the parade I had walked by a military building. The parking lot, which was not small, was full of gleaming Mercedes and BMW motor-cars. Not that government officials need to circulate in

jalopies to prove their earnestness. But a few more Toyotas would have seemed like a welcome nod towards egalitarianism.

There is plenty of hypocrisy, large and small, within the ruling class here. A Cuban might say the same thing in America or Britain. But, as with posters, it is the unfamiliar falsehood which catches your attention, rather than the falsehoods you have grown used to.