

Four area musicians helped Cuban guitarist Elmer Ferrer record his new album last May in Havana. The work gets its debut tomorrow at the Rainbow Bistro, reports **CHRIS LACKNER**.

# Latin blues with a taste of Ottawa

**W**hile Ottawa has invited Cuban musicians to Bluesfest since 2002, this year, one of them returned the favour.

Burgeoning blues-rock guitarist Elmer Ferrer welcomed four Ottawa residents to Havana in May to help record his new album.

The project required equal leaps of faith on the parts of Mr. Ferrer and rookie executive producer Bill Johnston, also the Bluesfest's Cuban stage programmer.

Seven months after meeting Mr. Ferrer during a music conference in Cuba, Mr. Johnston spent \$20,000 to produce the album *Rango Dance*. The album, which features the vocals of three Ottawa-based musicians, will be released tomorrow when Mr. Ferrer plays his first of multiple Bluesfest gigs during a 10 p.m. date at the Rainbow Bistro.

"I'd never seen an electric guitarist like Ferrer before. Honestly, I don't think I've ever seen better," Mr. Johnston says of this first exposure to Mr. Ferrer's music. "It inspired me to later create my own label and produce this album."

Critics have compared Mr. Ferrer's guitar skills to those of music legends like Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan. His extensive resumé includes performing stints with The Buena Vista Social Club and Havana Ensemble — a group of elite Cuban musicians who will also be playing at this year's festival.

But the 31-year-old guitarist remains down to earth. Mr. Ferrer is simply looking forward to his debut on a North American stage.

"Music plays such an important role in our culture and there are so many young, talented musicians here," Mr. Ferrer says through an interpreter from his home in Havana. "I feel very fortunate to have this opportunity to come to Canada and play in front of a large North American crowd."

Mr. Johnston and Mr. Ferrer have hashed out a four-year, four-album recording contract. For their first creative partnership, Mr. Ferrer wanted to produce an authentic, American blues-rock album. In order to

make the record sound authentic, Mr. Ferrer wanted North American vocalists.

It was by fluke, rather than design, that those vocalists ended up being Peter Voith, Sean Tavenier and Anders Drenrup of Ottawa. The three play in a cover band called Bourbon Brothers that performs at The Highlander Pub every Wednesday night. Mr. Voith and Mr. Anders are also part of country-roots band Quarterlife, which opens for Mr. Ferrer and Kid Rock at Bluesfest on July 15.

Mr. Johnston discovered Quarterlife during a band showcase at Ottawa's Zaphod's Beeblebrox nightclub, shortly before recording *Rango Dance*. Mr. Voith said he was skeptical when the newly minted producer offered to fly them to Havana.

"This guy approaches us and says 'I was just wondering if you'd like to record a record in Cuba with Cuban musicians,'" the 25-year-old Mr. Voith recalls. "Once and a while, peo-

ple tell you they want to invest in your band and it falls through, so we were a little bit cautious. But it was an enormous opportunity."

The three Canadians found Mr. Ferrer to be a gracious host, but also a workhorse.

Like all of the island's professional musicians, Mr. Ferrer was accepted into a state music academy in his home town of Sancti Spiritus at age 12. After four years of studying classical guitar, he moved to Havana to finish his senior years of education as an electric guitarist.

Mr. Ferrer said his passion for his family exceeds his music. His wife, Xyrla, wrote the lyrics on one of the new album's songs and a wordless tune, often sung by his five-year-old daughter, Isabella, found its way into the album's instrumentals.

During rehearsals for the album, the Canadian contingent spent one week jamming with the Elmer Ferrer Band in Mr. Ferrer's humble Havana home. "We played our English

songs, and their guys played Cuban music, and we kind of felt each other out," Mr. Voith says. "There were egg cartons all around the inside walls to deafen the sound, and close to 15 people in a small room and the music was just unbelievable."

The second week in Havana, the Cuban-Canadian ensemble spent midnight to 8 a.m. shifts in the studio of famous island musician Silvio Rodriguez to lay down tracks for their album. What emerged from the sessions was a number of original songs, as well as Mr. Ferrer's take on two classics, *Couldn't Stand the Weather* by Stevie Ray Vaughan and *Come Together* by The Beatles.

The cover art for *Rango Dance*, a rendition of Mr. Ferrer against the backdrop of a Cuban map, was created by world-famous Cuban artist Ibrahim Miranda, who is also a friend of Mr. Ferrer's. Mr. Miranda will be in Ottawa during the festival to launch a showcase of his work at Ottawa's

ArtSol Gallery on July 15.

Mr. Johnston says the Ottawa-based trio of musicians and Mr. Ferrer will likely collaborate on future albums. Overall, he is thankful his love of Cuban cigars exposed him to the island's music during frequent vacations over the years.

"They have 13,000 professional musicians — the most per capita of any place in the world," he says. "They are paid very little, and they have limited venues in which to perform, but they have their housing, hospital food and school costs paid for. They're so good, because they can spend so much time dedicated to their craft."

The Elmer Ferrer band makes its festival debut at 10 p.m. tomorrow at Rainbow Bistro in Ottawa. Mr. Ferrer will appear on the Bluesfest Acoustic Days and Cuban Nights stage on Sunday at 6 p.m., July 14 at 7:30 p.m. and July 17 at 7:30 p.m.

He opens for Kid Rock on the main stage on July 15 at 7:15 p.m.