

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

LOS VAN VAN

Jan Fairley on the Cuban band for all political seasons

Band members from left: Juan Formell; Los Van Van's violinist; Yenisel Valdés; Roberto Hernández; Mario 'Mayito' Rivera; Abdel Rasalps; Samuel Formell; Yenisel Valdés; Manuel Labarrera



Miami 1999 and Cuba's top dance band Los Van Van celebrate their 30th anniversary in exuberant style by winning a long deserved Latin Grammy for their disc *Llegó... Van Van*. They breach the hostilities engendered by the 50-year US blockade of Cuba by arriving to play a packed Miami Arena, although a police escort is needed for them and their audience. Outside, reputedly 5,000 demonstrators hold insulting placards calling Van Van 'bandits' and 'communist beggars.' High-profile objections saw the gig almost cancelled. Van Van leader Juan Formell's appeal is to: "Leave the politics aside; the important thing is to play for the Cubans here, to bring music, to make them dance!"

Van Van have created an endless stream of Cuban dance hits since they were founded back in December 1969. Back then, the Cuban revolutionary government was trying to liberate the island's fragile economy from dependence on the Soviet Union, by

mobilising the whole population to achieve an impossible bumper 10,000 ton sugar harvest (they managed 8.5). With zeitgeist acuity, the band took their name from the slogan of the moment: '*Diez millones, señora, los que van van!*' (Ten thousand, lady, those who go go!). The witty lyrics of their often tongue-in-cheek, irresistible songs have acted as a social commentary of Cuban everyday life and preoccupations.

In a country with a state-controlled press and no oppositional or underground publications or 'red tops,' the words of songs function like newspaper columns. Music has always been a barometer of everyday life in Cuba and Van Van have pulled off the astounding feat of creating songs with multiple layers of meaning involving playful, risqué humour that appeal across generations to Cubans on and off the island. There was 'La Habana No Aguanta Más' (Havana Can Take No More) – about overcrowding in Havana; 'Echalé Limón' (Add Some Lemon) – about adding spice to life with a relationship

on the side; 'El Baile del Buey Cansao' (The Dance of the Tired Oxen) – the dance of the tired worker; and classics from 1969 like the beloved 'Marilú.'

From the outset Van Van were at the cusp, as founder bassist Juan Formell modernised the classic French-Haitian influenced *charanga típica orchestra* of flute, clarinets, violins, piano, bass and *guiro* scraper by bringing in synthesizer, electric bass, trombones, guitars and an adapted drum kit covering all the timbres offered by congas, bongos, *batá* and *timbales*. At a time when rock was banned in Cuba for being too Western, Van Van astutely introduced a rock sensibility to classic dance music, evolving their own take on Cuba's national music, *son*, which they called *songo*, infused with funk, jazz and pop influences.

In a way their genius, or shall we say leader Formell's genius, has been to spot trends and shrewdly capitalise on them to huge effect. Van Van were not the first to write a song honouring the Afro-Cuban Santería religion which sustained many Cubans' hopes and lives during the difficult 90s, yet their song 'Soy Todo,' which fuses Cuba's music history and religion in one eloquent poem by Eloy Machado, remains the most enduringly popular. They've subtly rejuvenated personnel over the years, ensuring appeal to all ages. They've also kept a tight frontline of singers with remarkably different voices, who are versatile in different genres, notably pinching female singer Yenisel Valdés from the group NG La Banda in 2001. Dreadlocked Mayito has assured a multiracial image. Quality of musicianship goes without saying – Cuban bands rehearse hard, every member is a soloist, pulling their weight in the band while maintaining peer group credibility.

On January 2, 2010, Van Van return to play Miami. This time the *Miami Herald* headline is: '*Los Van Van rocks downtown Miami*' and there is no protest as 3,500 Miami Cubans come to the gig. Mayito delivers their spiritual

Vocalist Mayito enjoys some love from the crowd at a live show at the now closed Hammersmith Palais in September 2007



JULIE TRENANT

BEST...

...ALBUMS



Juan Formell y Los Van Van, *Aquí El Que Baila Gana: El Concierto* (EGREM 2CDs and DVD)
Van Van in all their

glory, live at Havana's Karl Marx Theatre playing a terrific set that maps their history.



Live at the Miami Arena (2CDs and DVD, Havana Caliente)

Kicking off with 'Ya Empezó La Fiesta' (The

Party's Begun), this defining set captures Miami high jinks.



Llegó... Van Van (Havana Caliente)

The Grammy award-winning album catches them cresting the wave.

Includes 'Temba, Tumba y Timba,' the tongue-twisting, *tele-novela* pastiche on why *timba* music comes out tops over relationships with younger or older partners.

...COMPILATIONS



Havana Si! The Very Best Of (Nascente, 2009)

This double compilation includes two classic tracks 'Esto Te Pone La

Cabeza Mala' and 'Qué Palo Es Ese!' and is a well balanced and reasonably priced introduction to the band. Reviewed in #60.

...AVOIDED

A plethora of compilations that recycle the same songs.

IF YOU LIKE LOS VAN VAN, THEN TRY...

TO'MEZCLA0

Híbrid (Tumi)



To'Mezclao are led by innovative producer-DJ Lyng Chang with two women in the line-up, including Chang's

partner Yusi González on keyboards (a real challenge for the male Cuban musical fraternity who feel it's a male role). They mix genres as agilely as they move their bodies, with the potential to be urban commentators too. Read the review and feature in #58.



A photo from the band's performance at the Varadero Festival in Cuba in May 1988. From left: César 'Pupy' Pedrosa on keyboards; founding member Juan Formell; Pedro Calvo; Los Van Van vocalist



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hymn 'Soy Todo' (I Am Everything) with a Cuban flag draped over his shoulder. Near the end of the night, this orchestra of 17 are joined on-stage by Isaac Delgado and Manolín, high-profile exile musicians who were the darlings of the 90s Havana *timba* scene.

Within Obama's America, cultural bridges are now being built as part of the desire for the final barriers of the 50-year US blockade of Cuba to be slowly dismantled. Cuba has softened its attitude to 'exiles' and high-profile artists: once called 'worms,' they are now the 'diaspora.' With a tone of mutuality, a new generation of economic exiles in Miami want

to keep pathways open, to enjoy music from back home and return when possible.

Performances of Van Van bridge that gap and never disappoint. True, they've consolidated around a classic repertoire since Formell, whose arthritic hands have more or less stopped him playing bass, passed the touring leadership to son Samuel. And they've not produced as many cutting-edge songs since stalwart keyboardist-songwriter César 'Pupy' Pedrosa and singer Pedro Calvo left to form their own groups in 2001. Still, with old and new members present, September 2009 saw Van Van lead the *descarga finale* for Colombian singer Juanes' historic Peace Without Frontiers concert in Revolution Square [read Backpage from Cuba, #64], involving a host of international stars, showing they remain securely Cuba's top orchestra. ●

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ONLINE You can hear music from Los Van Van at www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/068