

Mala In Cuba - sleevenotes.

If you sail north from Jamaica, within a few hundred miles or so – just next door in oceanic terms – you hit Cuba. Yet in many ways they're quite different, especially musically.

4 decades ago Mala's father left Jamaica for a rainy island in northern Europe. Then in 2011, under the wing of Gilles Peterson and Havana-Cultura.com (the island's online gateway to its rich cultural heritage) Mala returned to the region to try an experiment: to see what happened if an Anglo-Jamaican dubstep producer with one of the most individual and innate senses of both rhythm and who he is as an artist, began to soak up Cuban culture and make an album.

"He [Gilles] goes: 'You know, I listen to your music and I like the rhythms and the kind of percussion that you have in a lot of your tracks'" explains Mala. "And obviously you've got Jamaican roots. I think it would be a really nice fusion of sounds.' He knew that I knew nothing about Cuba. He just said: 'Why don't you come out here and see what happens?'"

An instinct, intuition or a prophetic vision: Gilles Peterson has been uniquely bringing interesting musicians to new places and spaces for several decades, so perhaps only he could have put Mala in Cuba. "I wanted to do something a little bit ... experimental and just out of the blue which was based on this clash of Britishness..." explains Gilles. "I've always been a believer in experimentation and trying things that you just don't think are going to work, and then, usually, things come out ... I just had an instinct..."

What ensued was two Havana Cultura trips with Gilles and Mala to Cuba, to try and make music with local Cuban musicians, most of all the prodigious Roberto Fonseca and his band. The first trip was a tester for both of them, with Gilles keen to see how Mala would react and Mala unsure of what was expected of him. "It wasn't actually until the morning... before we were going to meet Roberto and his band, that we came up with the concept that they would record traditional Cuban rhythms, and then from that, I'd be able to take that home and digest it," explains Mala, the impromptu nature of how even basic events unfolded reflecting not just how the project as a whole would come into being but his natural sense of subconsciously feeling his way through – rather than cognitively over-thinking – music.

Mala's response to his new environment proved crucial to the project, in several ways. Despite having previously played hundreds of gigs in over 65 different countries, he avoided superstar DJ clichés. "I'm sure some people would have just gone, 'Oh, where's the local McDonalds?'" laughs Gilles. "Or: 'I just want to stay there for three days and I'm actually not at all interested in the culture or anything.' But I think Mala found it fascinating. He's intelligent and inquisitive and the fact that he has Jamaican heritage, which is the island next door and Cuba's there and it's just so different, and they speak a different language and they've got different roots. But I thought, 'Let's throw him in.'"

And so the sessions began, with Mala based on his laptop and studio equipment and Roberto Fonseca's band jamming out different Cuban rhythms. Fonseca the virtuoso pianist, Ramses Rodriguez on drums, Omar Gonzalez on bass, percussionist Yaroldy Abreu, the legendary Changuito on timbales, Julio Rigal on trumpet, and Danay Suarez, Dreiser and Sexto Sentido contributing vocals. To complete the line-up Vince Vella added percussion. They jammed, recorded and vibed, even with the language barriers: technologically and linguistically. Yet to those who feel it deeply, music is a shared language and one they soon found they all understood.

"I think they could see that I'm more like them than like others, you know..." explains Mala. "I felt a real connection straightaway with some of the musicians out there and the people who they introduced me to as well... It's important in all of these experiences to try and let them show you about their world, rather than just inviting them to the hotel or to the studio and having a drink at the bar... I think it's important that you allow yourself to get involved in seeing real Cuba because that's really the only chance you're going to get."

Mala's investment in taking time to understand the people and local culture only explains so much about 'Mala in Cuba' however. The album is as much about how much the local musicians influenced him as how they didn't. "I didn't want to go out there and write a 'Cuban' record, so to speak," explains Mala. "The title is 'Mala in Cuba' - it was me trying to go into their world and bring their world to my world."

A kind of exchange took place, where mutual understanding grew. "All of them were just astonished at the weight of the tunes and how much bottom end that I was able to present to them without the speakers blowing up," laughs Mala, before describing in turn his humbled awe about them as live performers. "They could just do anything, man. The way they understand music and rhythm is just... it's totally beyond what I understand and that in itself was just kind of overwhelming."

Despite the best planning and organisation, some parts of 'Mala in Cuba', owe a debt to accident and chance. "I went to a club out there called Tunnel, it was where they played reggaeton. I didn't really connect with the music... I think I literally heard one track in three hours that I liked. Anyway, we were listening to some music in the car on the way back and I heard a hip-hop track in there and I remember the high hat pattern of this track, and I was like: 'That's sick! I'm going to try and remember this high hat pattern. I'm going to build a tune around it.' And that's what I did. I took it to the studios the next day, worked on it a bit more, and then Danay came in, I played her the track, and she was like 'Yeah! Give me it, I'll write a track for that and we'll record it tomorrow.'"

Mala In Cuba - sleeve notes.

That wasn't the only occasion chance intervened. The story of how Julio Rigil ended up playing trumpet on 'Calle F' is even less likely. "Somebody put on a party for me to play there," explains Mala. "It was just like a house party, they'd set up a sound system in their house and we just jammed to about a hundred people. And whilst I was playing one guy came up to me and said, 'Oh, can I play with you?' and I was like, 'What do you mean?' I thought he was on an MCing tip but he just drew for his trumpet. I just said, 'Yeah, go on then.' I was playing 'Lean Forward' at the time and he just started jamming this trumpet and I was like: 'Sick!' So, I said to the guy, 'Look, come to the studio tomorrow. Them guys will give you the address. Come there at about eleven o'clock.' And he was there with his trumpet and we just recorded."

So whether by design or by chance, by spoken language or unspoken understanding, this album is a very different piece of music than Mala had written before. While his sound has always had sample-based elements to it, from his breakthrough track 'Pathwayz' to iconic vocal refrains in 'Learn' and 'Anti War Dub', never has his music been so overtly organic, dominated by gentler acoustic classical or jazz instruments. Never have his arrangements been so dense and evolving. The edge of his sound is mellowed by the maturity of the instruments.

And yet there is much that is constant about this album, to long time Mala fans: the weighty sub bass lines, the tempo and the detailed but tough percussion. "Sonically it's a different sounding record from maybe what I've done previously, but I feel it's almost like an enhanced record where it's musically more advanced. I think the mixdowns are better, I think the arrangements are different, but sonically it's still sound system music. You put that on a sound system and it's going to hold up next to 'Blue Note' and 'Lean Forward'. I've played them next to those tunes and it does that... but ultimately it's just that thing isn't it? 'You can take the boy out of Croydon, but you can't take Croydon out of the boy.' It's like, I'm always going to do that, that's just me, you know, I can't change myself." And nor, to be fair, do the lovers of his music want him to.

Completing the dual recording sessions in Cuba however, wasn't even half the challenge, it transpires. Mala returned home with "literally fifty or sixty GB worth of playing," which to put that in context, would take around 80 hours of continuous listening just to hear the entire recording once.

As a function of the wealth of recordings he'd return with, Mala wrote over 30 different tracks based on the source material. It was at this point that the walls came tumbling down. He was experiencing the ultimate post-holiday blues: "When I was back home on my own, that's when it's a madness because you're just in your own world, going round and round and round. Just making one tune is a maze, so when you've got thirty tracks in front of you, that's thirty different mazes that you're trying to get yourself out of. But the madness is that you've actually created the maze from scratch, so it's even more frustrating that you can't get yourself out of it."

"There were definitely points while I was making the album where I was just, like, 'Bwoy, I'm not sure I can do this, man.' At some points I was at the end. I was just like, 'I've got no more to give. I've given everything and I just can't find the missing pieces to complete the puzzle.'" Suddenly, very privately, the entire project was in doubt. Mala was lost in a paradox of his own making, one that a producer even of his abilities couldn't get out of. And there it could have remained, lost and incomplete in the bowels of Mala's Mac for time immemorial. Mala being the private person he is, nothing might ever have been said about it and the world would have been none the wiser.

"You know I got to that point in January this year where I'd lost all objectivity. I actually think I emailed Gilles and I said: 'Look. I'm really sorry. I'm really embarrassed that I've got to send this message to you, but I'm just not sure I can do this. I'm really at an end of it. I think the only way I'm going to do it is if I can bring in someone who I know, who I can trust with my work, who I know they know music.'"

It was time, in the style of a great football manager, for Gilles to make an inspired substitution. The answer was Simbad. He'd met Mala in Puerto Rico several years ago playing at a festival, and they'd instantly connected as if they'd known each other for years. "Everybody loves Simbad," laughs Gilles and so he was dispatched to Mala's to see if he could guide him out of the maze. Crucially: he's classically trained.

"Somebody like Simbad, you know, he'll walk into a studio with anyone..." declares Mala. "I think on one tune - 'Changuito' - the track was pretty much done and he said 'The bassline: it's a semi-tone out.' And I was like: 'No bruv, the beat sounds fine.' He insisted: 'No, trust me, it's a semi tone out... just take it down a semi tone.' So I did it was like 'Rah, okay, now the whole harmonic of the tune is gelling together differently.' And it's not actually that pitching the bassline down a semi tone makes a big difference in itself, but how it relates to the rest of the music and the overall harmonic energy that's building up because, you know, we're working with sound; layers and layers and layers of sound. So, when everything is harmonically in tune, perfectly, actually something else starts shifting, the frequencies and the energy."

In a maze a simple, but key, left turn can make a crucial difference and it would seem that Simbad very much knows his left from his right and indeed from his wrong. "He gave me my objectivity back, basically, and a new perspective... just hearing what he had to say about things, it just gave me that reference point again, so things started really taking shape." From that shape came the album we hear today.

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“I was very, very grateful that they allowed me to explore the material that I had and really try and take time and translate my experience of Cuba, because that’s ultimately what this record is for me. It’s not me trying to make a Cuban record, it’s about me trying to explore what I felt and what I experienced whilst I was there and what I took home, both on a mental level, on a spiritual level and on a musical level. So, I think, when I listen to it sonically, there are things in there that there’s no way I would have created had I not gone to Cuba.”

“Up to today, it’s probably been one of the best things that’s happened because it took me out of my comfort zone and it really made me work in a different way. It made me look at myself in a different way, it made me look at working with others in a different way and you end up not being so precious about what you’re doing. You have to be open in order to allow change to happen, for things to move forward.”

“It really made me learn a lot of things and... I’m not sure I can go back again to the way that I used to just make music. I think I will always look at it from this point of view that I have now.”

Martin Clark
LDN, Summer 2012