

Sparkling a Cuban evolution



Canadian Jane Bunnett and Maqueque, her ensemble of Cuban musicians, won a Juno for best jazz album this year

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Jane Bunnett hopes to inspire young women with her latest collaboration

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In recent times, Jane Bunnett has established herself as one of the most celebrated talents in Canadian jazz.

Across 30 years the Toronto-based saxophonist-flautist has received five Juno awards (the Canadian equivalent of the US Grammys); been awarded the Order of Canada in 2004 for “for outstanding achievement and service to the country or to humanity at large”; received an honorary doctorate in 2006 from Queen’s University at Kingston, Ontario, and earned two nominations for the Grammys, and other awards too numerous to list.

Yet back in 2008, at the peak of her career, it all ground to a halt. As Bunnett relates in the documentary *Embracing Voices: The Woman Behind the Music of Jane Bunnett*, she seriously considered giving up music.

“I was broken and exhausted. I kind of felt frozen, just extremely empty. I couldn’t push the agency to get work. I didn’t feel like writing, or practicing, or putting a record on.”

Now on the eve of an Australian tour with her all-female group Maqueque, Bunnett says her passion for Cuban music helped during her process of recovery from depression.

Bunnett first visited the country with her husband, Canadian trumpeter Larry Cramer, in 1982, and she estimates they have returned at least 80 times.

From the outset, Cuban music was “a huge surprise.”

“We had no idea how much music was there, and also how high the standard and quality of the music was,” she says.

Bunnett’s illness had been accumulating for some time. In 2005 percussionist Pancho Quinto died. He was the oldest member of the Spirits of Havana ensemble in which Bunnett and Cramer collaborated with Cuban musicians for nearly 20 years. Quinto, a godfather of the guarapachangueo style of Cuban rumba, was a father-figure for Bunnett, and his death severely affected her.

There was also a dawning regret that she and Cramer were childless. In a moving dialogue captured in the *Embracing Voices* film, the couple, now in their 50s, discusses this intimate fact.

Things might have been different for them, says Cramer, “if we had kids when we were in our 20s. Before we knew it, when we were seriously attempting it, it was probably too late. We love kids and it’s kind of weird that we don’t have any kids.”

There was also the feeling that Bunnett and Cramer might have erred in giving too much of themselves to their music. Still, the high priority of music in their lives could not be downgraded.

As Bunnett’s close friend, US singer Sheila Jordan — still performing at 86 — told her, “Whether you’re up or down, whatever’s going on in your life, when you’re playing, within yourself there’s a feeling that happens ... and you have to take care of that gift.”

In recovering from her illness, a saving grace for Bunnett was her love for Cuban culture, which she shared with her husband.

“Then, as now — holy smoke — as we travel, the music continues to blow our minds, especially when you travel to the interior provinces,” Bunnett says.

“The styles and influences are huge, from Europe, Africa, Haiti. Until you experience it, you have no idea. It is like no other country, for sure.”

“Cuban musicians are great collaborators,” says Cramer. “They go at music with an openness to new ideas and a passion that is infectious. With all the difficulties facing the people, music thrives.”

While the US maintained, until recently, an embargo on the island off the coast of Miami for more than 50 years, Canada always maintained diplomatic relations. Toronto to Havana is only a three-hour flight. Bunnett and Cramer have been able to pull off countless projects across 30 years with Cuban musicians, enabling many of the best of them to be introduced to the wider musical world.

Their work with the Creole Choir of Cuba, for example, is thoroughly documented in the *Embracing Voices* film.

Bunnett’s latest collaboration with Cuban musicians is the six-piece, all-woman ensemble Maqueque. Maqueque, pronounced Mah-keh-keh, is an Afro-Cuban word for “the energy of a little girl,” says Bunnett.

In 2013 she found the young musicians — all in their 20s — and, after a whirlwind three days rehearsal, took them into the recording studio. The resultant album, entitled *Maqueque*, won this year’s Juno Award for best jazz album (group).

Other than Bunnett on soprano saxophone & flute, Maqueque includes Melvis Santa (vocals, percussion & dance), Dánae Olano (piano & vocals), Magdelys Savigne (vocals & percussion), Célia Jiménez (vocals & bass) and Yissy García (drums). American jazz magazine *DownBeat* has described Maqueque as “a band of young killer female musicians”.

There is a nuanced feminism here. “Cuba is very macho, and it’s very hard for women to get ahead in the music scene there,” says Bunnett, who does not exaggerate the mentoring aspect of the project. “Am I teaching them, or are they teaching me? It’s a bit of both happening. I’m learning a lot, as always, about Cuban music.”

Bunnett hopes the spectacle of six women performing high-energy jazz will be an example to the wider world: “I think Maqueque sends out a really great message to young women everywhere about the possibilities of music.”

Maqueque’s recorded music reveals an exotic mixture: rich vocal harmonies, exuberant Afro-Cuban percussion; and the busy, passionate improvisations of Bunnett. Anyone expecting a sedate musical experience should think again. This full-blooded ensemble takes no prisoners. If fired up, they could lift the roof off.

Jane Bunnett and Maqueque perform at the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz & Blues, Friday and Saturday; then tour Brisbane, Armidale, Sydney (three shows at the Sydney International Women’s Jazz Festival) and Wollongong.