

1989 Sunday
3 December

Cold War ends

After two days of talks in Malta, the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and the US president George Bush declared an end to the Cold War. Three weeks later the Brandenburg Gate was opened in Berlin

NICO ROJAS

Guitarist and composer who mixed Cuban rhythms with jazz

Although he was unable to properly write down his own compositions and never pursued music as anything more than a hobby, Nico Rojas was a highly respected guitarist and composer in his native Cuba.

He was a key member of the *filin* ("feeling") movement, which combined Cuban rhythms with harmonies and melodies influenced by North American jazz in the 1940s and 1950s. He later recorded for the Cuban label EGREM, and his songs were performed and recorded by numerous Cuban artists, including Omara Portuondo, Elena Burke, Frank Emilio Flynn and Pablo Milanes. However, many of his pieces might have been lost had it not been for the work of his young protégé, Ahmed Dickinson Cárdenas.

The son of a well-to-do architect in pre-revolutionary Cuba, Rojas was encouraged to enjoy classical and popular music, and given a guitar as a child, although neither lessons nor a

career in music were on the agenda. Instead, he studied hydraulic engineering at the University of Havana, but in 1942 became involved with a group of composers who were pioneering the *filin* sound. He urged the other 13 members to seek inspiration in classical music, and encouraged them to pursue music professionally.

However, after graduating, he took a job in the capital of the neighbouring province of Matanzas, where he lived for the next quarter of a century, designing many of the area's bridges and viaducts, including the celebrated one at Bacunayagua on the Via Blanca highway, which links Havana and the tourist resort of Varadero.

He also gave annual recitals at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de la Habana (the National Museum of Fine Arts), so that his songs became known to the musical cognoscenti in Havana. His exceptionally large hands enabled him to do things most guitarists couldn't and his improvisatory style fea-



Rojas: his large hands helped him do things most guitarists can't JESUS ROJAS

tured quotes from sources as diverse as Chopin and the classical guitar repertoire alongside Cuban traditions such as trova and rumba.

He composed the bulk of his work in the 1940s and 1950s, and in 1964, recorded his first album *Suite Cubana Para Guitarra* (EGREM), followed by a further album in 1977. He also had another burst of writing during the 1980s, which produced the suite "Homenaje al Filin". Rojas received a number of cultural awards in Cuba,

including one in 1994 from UNEAC, the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba.

In the company of the blind Cuban pianist Frank Emilio Flynn, the Canadian jazz flautist/saxophonist Jane Bunnett recorded Rojas' "Tony Y Jesusito" on her 1993 album *Jane Bunnett & the Cuban Piano Masters* (Blue Note). In 1997, Frank Emilio Flynn Y Sus Amigos released the album *Barbarismo*, which also featured "Tony Y Jesusito" and "Mi Ayer" ("My Yester-

day"), another Rojas composition. The latter also featured on the 1997 album *Palabras* (Intuition) by the Buena Vista Social Club's Omara Portuondo.

In 1998, despite arthritis in his hands, Rojas took his first flight, to perform at the Lincoln Centre in New York with Flynn, whose group were joined by the Buena Vista Social Club bassist Orlando "Cachaito" López and Wynton Marsalis.

It was while appearing at Havana's International Guitar Festival in 2000 that Rojas met Ahmed Dickinson, with whom he struck up a friendship. Realising that the old master could not read music and was in danger of forgetting his own works, Dickinson transcribed 33 of Rojas' compositions over the next five years, with help from Rojas and his son Jesús. Five of Rojas' compositions were recorded by Marco Tamayo on the album *Guitar Music From Cuba* (Naxos Classical) in 2004, and in October this year Ahmed Dickinson - now based in London - released his debut album, *Ahmed Dickinson Plays Nico Rojas* (Cubafilin Records), which consisted of 16 Rojas compositions.

Jon Lusk

José Antonio ("Nico") Rojas Beoto, guitarist, songwriter and hydraulic engineer: born Havana, Cuba 3 August 1921; married 1949 Eva Montes (three sons, and one daughter deceased); died Havana 22 November 2008.