



Looking fabulous three dress sizes smaller than when she shot the video for *My Gigolo*, Liz is looking to form a jazz band here in New Zealand.

la. vida loca

When Kiwi Liz Metcalfe visited Cuba, she never expected to end up a hit on the Havana street-music scene – with a song inspired by a gigolo. She talks to Sarah Lang

PHOTOGRAPH CHRIS SKELTON

IMAGINE A CUBAN MUSIC video for a reggae/rap song titled *My Gigolo*, set on the streets and beaches of Havana with two women jostling over a man, a 'censored' rocking car, and a lot of low-cut tops. You probably wouldn't expect the video star/singer/songwriter to be a generously proportioned, middle-aged Auckland woman whose CV sports numerous IT projects and an accounting degree.

But 46-year-old Liz Metcalfe, whose voice is as soft as her dress sense is quirky, has more than one surprise up her sleeve. Formerly an author, stand-up comedian, salsa dancer and Argentine tango teacher, Liz loves all things Cuban: The high spirits, the live-life-to-the-max approach, and especially the music. So, in April 2008, she made her third trip (visitors can stay only three months at a time) to the frozen-in-time communist country known for its poverty and partying, but less noted for its first-rate education and healthcare systems.

Her trip proved propitious. During a concert by reggaeton band Big Law, who perform a blend of reggae/salsa/pop/hip hop/R&B/electronica, Liz was swaying to the beats when the band manager and producer →

Eduardo approached her, asking if she'd play a car passenger in their about-to-be-filmed music video.

"Afterwards I somehow summoned the audacity to talk to Eduardo, and mentioned I'd been writing music. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, as they would, but he said very politely 'Come to the studio tomorrow'. Neither he nor I thought anything would come of it."

On turning up, she was instructed to take the microphone then and there. "And I'm not a singer. Or at least I didn't think I was..." Plucking up her courage, she sang three genre-meshing songs in a rudimentary studio which had egg cartons on the walls for the acoustics. When he told her to come back after he'd laid down some basic backing on track *My Gigolo*, she thought he was just too nice to say that no, she didn't have the goods.

"But a week later when I knocked on his door he had this big smile on his face. He played my song back to me and it sounded okay – pretty good in fact!" Pausing, she breaks into a rap: "Hey boy, whatcha need on the street, hey boy whatcha need to compete".

On hearing the catchy beats, three musician friends of Eduardo



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immediately volunteered to form a band with Liz, no payment necessary. Then her friend Antonio Dominguez Aguirre (aka 'Tony Llunque'), a famous-in-Cuba protégé of, and collaborator with, late musical great Compay Segundo, teased her into letting him join La Ley (now renamed Che Ley) as guitarist.

In Cuba, you have to pay big bucks or already be a big name to get on the radio, so it's not the measure of success for new music. Rather you get airtime via street fixture the 'bicitaxi' – a cycle taxi which doubles as a loud stereo, and at night draws people to dance around it like moths to a flame. And *My Gigolo* was a street-music hit.

The song's muse was easy-on-the-eye friend-of-a-friend, Henry. "I used to joke about him being a gigolo but it turned out to be quite true!" Although about to join his beautiful, well-off wife in Spain, Henry was with a different girl every time Liz saw him. "They'd give him money. One day an Italian woman, a so-called girlfriend, sent him US\$7000." After Henry left for Spain, Liz heard he was still picking up women. "I put myself in his wife's shoes: How would I feel being married to a man like

that? I wouldn't want him. That's why the song."

In the music video (catch it on YouTube) Liz, who's since lost three dress sizes, plays a long-suffering wife begging her hubby, played by Antonio, to keep his wandering hands to himself.

Making a relatively racy video in strictly regulated Cuba was no easy task. Turning up at a beach, Liz realised the ever-present military and police were casting suspicious looks their way. Eventually a general grudgingly granted permission to film. By the time their practice run was over, a crowd had gathered and started singing along; another impromptu chorus materialised when filming shifted to a cafe.

Single with no children, Liz spends half the year doing contract work (largely IT project-management) mainly from Auckland, freeing up the rest of the year to "do what makes my heart sing". While one year that was kids' book *The Yellow Hello* (published under the name Lizzie Karen) and cookbook *Vegetarian Inspirations*, mostly recently it's been travelling the world and writing music.

"Eight years ago I woke up and thought, I'm not just going to spend my life working to get a bigger house, a flasher

car. Maybe it's what they call burnout, but I think it was more like a state of enlightenment."

In April Liz returned from her latest trip to Cuba, where she completed voice training, experimented with fusing genres, sang jazz at a club, recorded six songs with Che Ley and wrote several others. Towards the end of her stay she was approached to work with reggaeton/rap band Sello Cubano. Writing and recording two R&B songs together, they were invited to perform at the big-ticket Cabaret Nacional in Havana.

"The breakthrough was really happening for me but I had to return or starve."

While she'll return to Cuba soon, the next step is trying to break into the New Zealand music industry. Liz, who'd like to get a small jazz band together here, has applied for a funding grant to put together an album.

One song which may just grab us is rock-style *Men of Black*, which Liz scribbled down, sang and strummed solo in Cuba after dreaming she'd written a song for the All Blacks. Judging by the fairytale so far, perhaps one day soon we'll be driving to work humming about our men-in-black, Cuban-style. ▀