

Trombone Shorty poses with student musicians at the Guillermo Tomas Music Conservatory of Havana.

FUNKY FRIENDS

Trombone Shorty leads a musical exchange in Havana

by Hilary Saunders

TROY ANDREWS, THE MAN behind New Orleans funk outfit Trombone Shorty & Orleans Avenue, wears sunglasses inside. The

wooden slats of the Guillermo Tomas Music Conservatory of Havana are open, so the island sun casts parallel streams of light into the concrete room. It's not really so bright to warrant the shades, but in a way, Shorty seems like he wants to be incognito. After all, he's the rock star in the room waiting to witness dozens of Cuban music students perform for him, and he wants *them* to be the center of attention.

The Cuban students, however, are in awe. They come up to him, ask to take photos and selfies, give hugs, and all jam together. It may not matter to them, but Shorty has released eight studio albums (as well as four live albums) and won a Grammy award, not to mention worked extensively in community development through his own Trombone Shorty Foundation. What they do know is that he is someone special on and off the stage, in and out of that concrete classroom.

Part of the Trombone Shorty Foundation's mission is co-organizing events like the second annual Havana Funk Expedition, which facilitated moments like

these. The cross-cultural musical trip, which also included organizational and financial partners like Cuba Educational Travel, the Gia Maione Prima Foundation, and Horns to Havana, took place Jan. 12-16 this year. In some ways an all-inclusive getaway for curious visitors to the island, and in other ways a powerful and meaningful international exchange for students and adults, the musical connection between New Orleans and Havana remained at the forefront for all participants.

The more than 100 American guests who joined this year's Havana Funk Expedition were treated to shows from professional musicians including all of Trombone Shorty's band Orleans Avenue, New Orleans artists like jam band Galactic, producer/rapper Mannie Fresh, Los Angeles-based jazz trumpeter Keyon Harrold, and New York-based jazz pianist James Francies. Cuban breakout star Cimafunk (who will perform at the FreshGrass Festival | Bentonville, produced by *No Depression's* nonprofit publisher, the FreshGrass Foundation) hosted a range of local talent on the ground in Havana, including the feminist hip-hop-meets-soul group La Reyna y La Real, musical collective Interactivo, and folksinger and protest singer

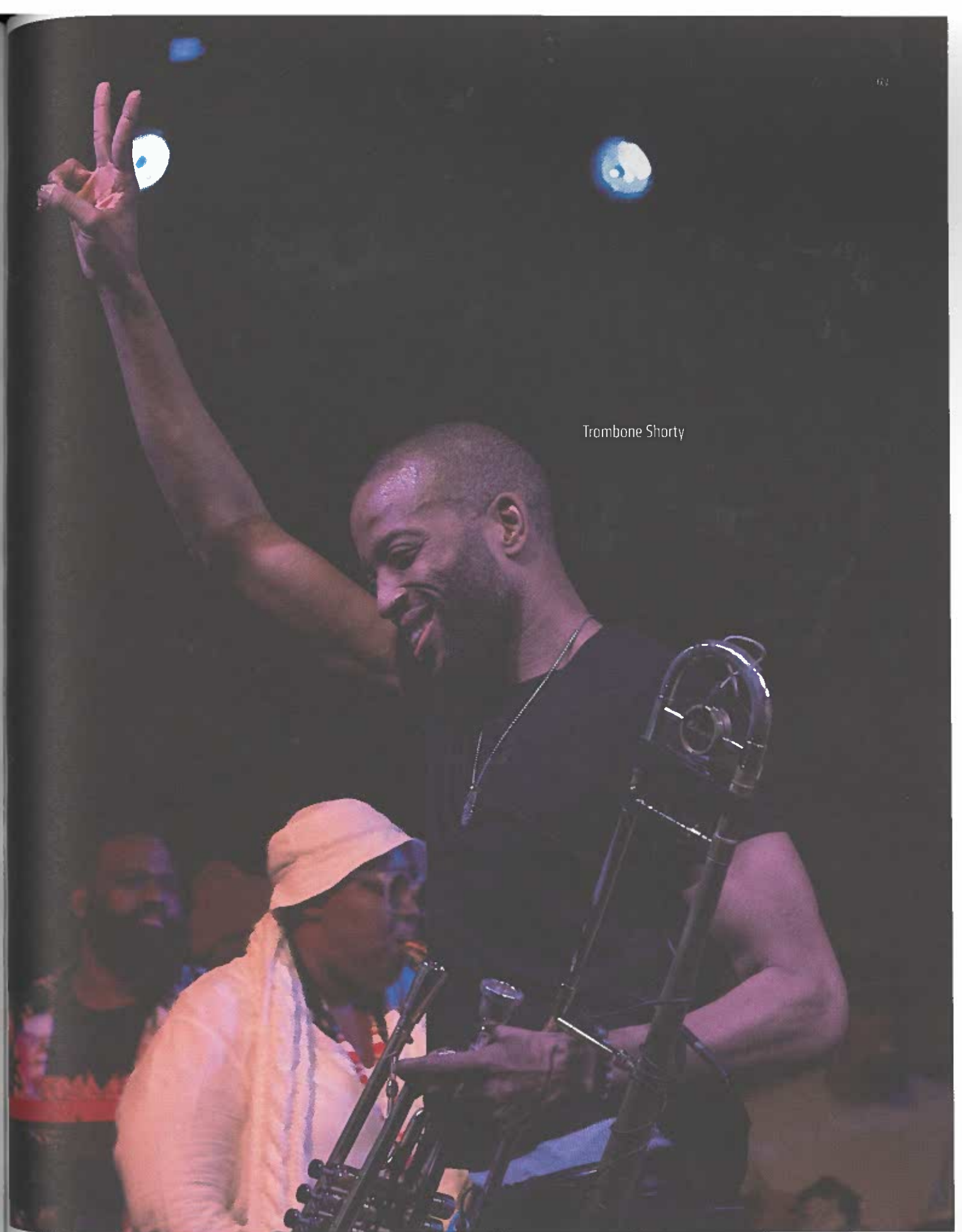
Carlos Varela (often referred to as "the Cuban Bob Dylan").

But according to Bill Taylor, founding executive director of the Trombone Shorty Foundation, the kids are "the glue that holds it all together." And as part of the foundation's mission to "inspire the next generation of talented youth through music education, instruction, mentorship, and performance," eight young New Orleans-based students were able to come to Cuba to learn, collaborate, and perform with students at the Guillermo Tomas Music Conservatory.

Despite not speaking the same language and growing up under drastically different political conditions, the student musicians from New Orleans and Havana communicated fluidly through music. The trip not only fostered social and musical connections between the young players, but also illustrated the musical commonalities between New Orleans funk and Havana jazz. Their roots come from similar places — geographically, musically, and spiritually.

The following photos are part of *No Depression's* full coverage of the Havana Funk Expedition, which can be found online at nodepression.com.

PHOTOS BY HILARY SAUNDERS



Trombone Shorty



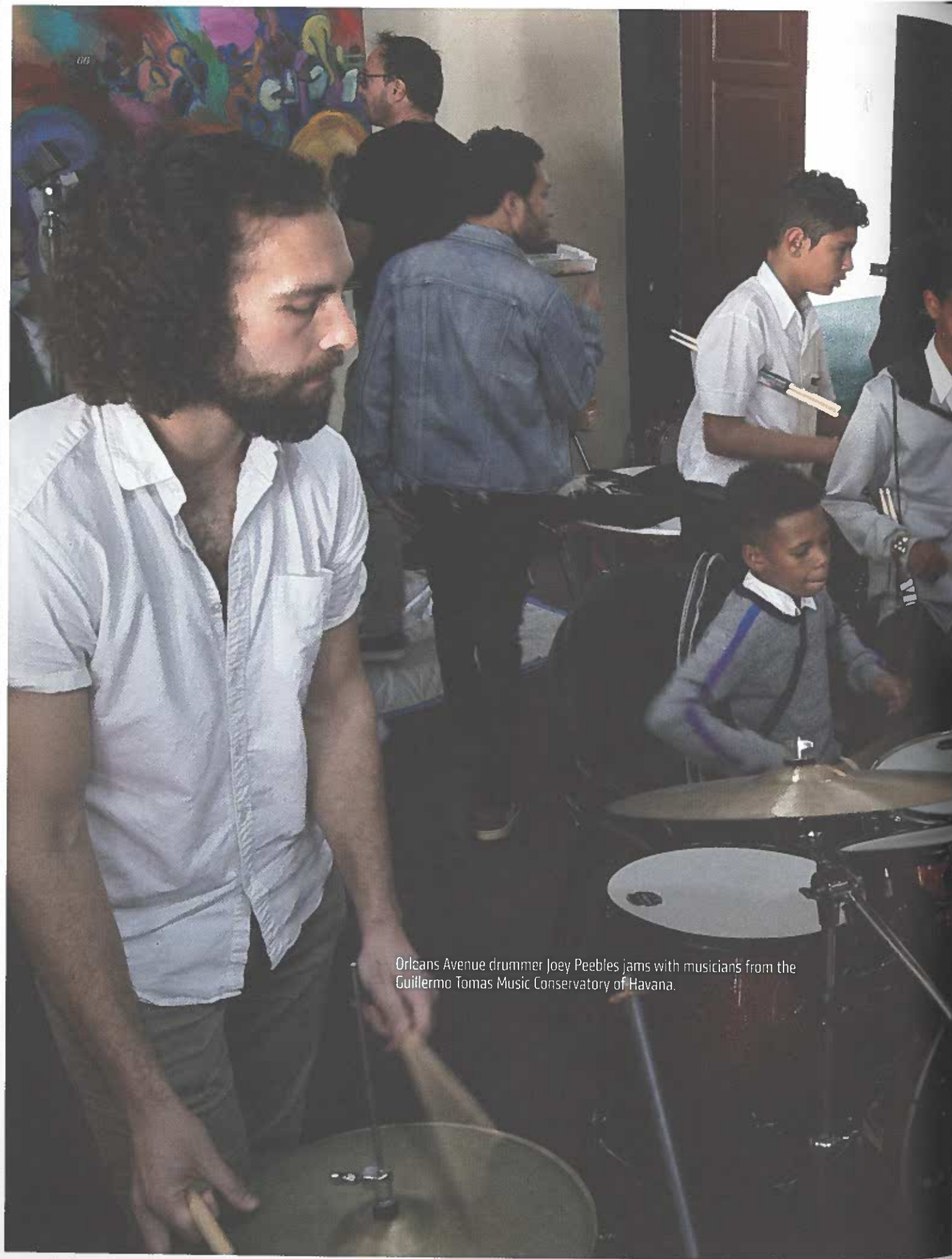
From left, Trombone Shorty Foundation executive director Bill Taylor, Trombone Shorty, and Anthony Sylvester of the Gia Maione Prima Foundation. "It's important to note that sometimes when these connections happen, a lot of it is rooted in the past, like it's a heritage thing. This is very much like a forward-looking thing," Taylor said. "When you have CimaFunk and Trombone Shorty together, you're not looking behind you. You're looking in front of you at what the future could look like."



Juan Licor, a 14-year-old trumpet student at the Guillermo Tomas Music Conservatory of Havana, performs a solo. After the Trombone Shorty concert at Los Jardines de la Tropical, Juan described his experience working with Trombone Shorty and the Trombone Shorty Foundation as "fantastic. ... [It] helped me develop my senses and develop my stage presence. I was able to relax, improvise with eyes closed. It was like a rainbow."



Trombone Shorty speaks at the Guillermo Tomas Music Conservatory of Havana. A painting that New Orleans-based visual artist John Bukaty made in real time while students performed earlier in the morning hangs behind him.



Orleans Avenue drummer Joey Peebles jams with musicianS from the Guillermo Tomas Music Conservatory of Havana.

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After the trip, Shorty reminisced, “Those children are amazing. The level of talent, dedication, and sheer joy just blew my mind. We wanted to first hear where they were coming from musically, and then I brought all our New Orleans musicians together with the [Cuban] kids to find ways to mix our sounds together. I took a New Orleans Second Line song with some Caribbean flavor, and it fit right in with the Cuban sounds.”



Trombone Shorty jams with student musicians from the Trombone Shorty Foundation in New Orleans and the Guillermo Tomas Music Conservatory of Havana.

Cimafunk and Trombone Shorty perform at Los Jardines de la Tropical (part of the Havana Metropolitan Parks system). Cimafunk hosted the Havana Funk Expedition on the ground in Cuba and his recent album, *El Alimento*, was nominated for Best Latin Rock or Alternative Album at the 2023 Grammys.



Trombone Shorty and Cimafunk saxophonist Katerin Llerena, who is an alumna of the Guillermo Tomas Music Conservatory of Havana

