

## **Afro-Cuban Jazz: The Journey by Bobby Sanabria**

Afro-Cuban Jazz was born out of a cultural melting pot that is synonymous with the New York City experience. The music is completely multi-cultural and therefore all inclusive. To get at what I've just stated, you have to understand a little of the history of Cuba and its relationship with the United States and West Africa.

### **THE BLACK DEATH**

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean, had the most natural resources and became the crown jewel in the Spanish Empire from the 15th through 19th centuries. Named after the Arawak Amer-Indian chief Cubanacan, Cuba's native population was essentially wiped out by the end of the 16th century.

After Columbus landed on the Bahamian island of Guanahani on October 12, 1492 the brutal extermination of its natives began. With no immunity to the diseases being brought over from Europe, the Arawaks, Caribs and Tainos (the three main nations) died enmass. Columbus in his misconception that there was much gold to be found in the Caribbean, greatly exaggerated his claims to the Spanish court. On his return to the Caribbean in 1493 he arrived with fifteen ships and 1,500 men to, as we say in da' Bronx, ...bogat the muther." Bartolome De Las Casas, a young Catholic priest and crew member, documented this slaughter he called "The Black Death."

De Las Casas book, *The Devastation Of The West Indies*, detailed the systematic atrocities committed by the Conquistadores. Disgusted by the horrors he witnessed: rape, murder, infanticide, slavery, theft, bribery and torture, De Las Cases made a decision that changed the course of history. Ironically the result of this decision is the reason we all shake our booties today.

### **KING CANE**

In order to save the native population whom he viewed as "innocent.. uneducated souls to be saved," De Las Casas proposed that the empire should instead import West Africans as slaves. According to De Las Casas they were "... a hardier stock of people suitable to the work ..." Man, what a guy this De Las Casas was, he gives with one hand and takes with the other!

In 1511, government authorized slavery officially commenced in the Caribbean with fifty African slaves being brought to the island of Hispaniola. When the Spanish realized there was little gold to be found in the Caribbean, they imported sugar from Africa and made Cuba their main refinery. With the importation of slave labor from the Yoruba, Arara, Efik nations of Nigeria, Ewe-Fon from Dahomey and Bantu from the Congo, the island soon became the largest sugar producer in the world. (Of course Spain would later find the gold they were looking for in Central and South America and also systematically wipe out the Maya and Inca empires.) What about Columbus? Well since the king, queen, court and investors were pissed-off at him because there really was so

little gold to be found in the Caribbean, they decided to "reward him". They threw him in jail. Columbus died in Valladolid, Spain in total obscurity in 1506. What did Columbus really do? Wipe out a whole race of people. What did we do? Of course; give him a parade every year!

## **SLAVE RIGHTS**

The West African peoples enslaved in Cuba brought with them an incredible wealth of highly developed religious beliefs, music and culture. Why did this culture survive in Cuba and not the United States? The principal reason was that Spain's government mandated that all slaves had to be converted to Catholicism, thus treating them as religious equals. In Cuba, intermarriage, the ability to speak one's native tongue, playing of drums and performance of songs and dances that came from the motherland were frequently allowed.

By stark contrast the US. Constitution stated that Blacks were only 5/8 human. Blacks were considered animals who had no legitimate rights to the freedoms espoused by the so called founding forefathers and therefore beasts of burden. It was against the law to intermarry, speak any African based languages, even to dance in public or sing African based melodies and/or drum. In 1879 when Blacks were freed in Cuba, many migrated to New Orleans bringing their island's rich musical vocabulary to the mix which later came to be called Jazz.

Meanwhile back in Cuba, the Black work force was replaced by bringing in Chinese slaves who were not freed until 1886. Now you know why we have such great Chinese-Cuban restaurants in NYC!

## **A NEW CULTURE**

By the end of the sixteenth century, West African, Southern Spanish, Middle Eastern and Arabic culture fused in eastern Cuba (oriente) in a music called "Son." Son is the mother of what today is known as "Salsa". The tradition of Son showcases the vocalists ability to improvise on a given theme. You hear modern day Salsa singers do this in the montuno (call and response) section of a tune.

In late 19th century Havana and Matanzas a new music form was developing based on West African drumming, chants and dance traditions fused with Flamenco based vocal and dance styles with vendor songs in the slave quarters (solares), patios and docks people were celebrating the end of slavery with this new form known as the Rumba.

Meanwhile, the ongoing relationship between the U.S. and Cuba based on the free trade of sugar, tobacco and rum was at its height. In Havana's 1930's, prostitution, gambling and liquor were controlled by organized crime and the sound of jazz exploded from swanky hotels and nightclubs. White American jazz musicians were getting the best jobs in the hotels, while only light skinned mulatto Cuban players were given the opportunity to work. Except for one extraordinary young Black virtuoso who would later spawn the creation of Afro-Cuban Jazz.

Prudencio Mario Bauzá was a young prodigy who had played clarinet in the Havana Philharmonic. At the age of twelve, he turned down a scholarship at La Scala in Milan, Italy because he knew there was no future at that time for a Black man in classical music.

Mario fell in love with jazz music he heard on the radio. In 1927 on a tour of New York City with pianist Antonio Maria Romeu he fell in love with Harlem. In 1930, he returned to New York to make it his permanent home and become a jazz musician. By 1933, he had switched to trumpet and became the musical director of famed drummer Chick Webb's Orchestra. Arguably, the most potent force in Big Band jazz at the time. While in Webb's band he discovered vocalist Ella Fitzgerald. In 1938 Mario turned down an offer by Duke Ellington and became Cab Calloway's lead trumpeter. He brought trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie to the band and while Gillespie was his roommate, Mario tutored him on the intricacies of Afro-Cuban rhythm. By 1940, Mario had become the eminent jazz lead trumpeter in N.Y.C. Little did he know that he was soon to change musical history.

### **THE AFRO-CUBANS**

One day when Mario was in Calloway's band, he played some recordings of Cuban Son for his bandmates. The musicians laughed mockingly at what they heard and referred to it derogatorily as hillbilly music. Mario responded, "One day there will be an orchestra that will play Cuban music on the same level as the great American jazz big bands."

In that instant Mario had articulated his vision to create a dream band, a combination of jazz players who could improvise and perform harmonically sophisticated arrangements with its engine powered by the complex polyrhythms of his native Cuba. His brother-in-law Frank Grillo (Machito) would be the orchestra's vocalist and frontman. In 1940 Mario would be the musical director and chief arranger of the Machito Afro-Cubans.

By the mid 40's the Machito Afro-Cubans broke new ground. As the first "fusion band," Mario brought together two old branches of an ancient African tree; jazz and Afro-Cuban music. His band was the first group to use the triumphant of conga, bongo and timbales simultaneously. They were the first to use the term "Afro," actively raising the consciousness of Blacks in the U.S. to the African elements in this music and its ancestral ties. The Machito Afro-Cubans were the first multi-racial band employing Blacks, Latinos and Anglos. More importantly, The Afro-Cubans set a standard of professionalism and musical sophistication that gave Latinos in the 40's pride in their multi-racial culture.

By the late 40's, every major Jazz soloist of the day wanted to be featured with The Afro-Cubans, Thus began "Mambo Madness."

The Machito Afro-Cubans under Mario's direction epitomized the best of what our multi-cultural society can become. The genre they created, Afro-Cuban Jazz, represents the 500 year history of what happened in the New World. We carry on this legacy in American popular culture today. From the music of James Brown, Frank Sinatra,

Santana, Celia Cruz, Tower of Power, Lauren Hill, Tito Puente, Duke Ellington, Frank Zappa, the list goes on and on. We all have something in common with this ancient African tree.

### **CODA**

As Mario's drummer from 1988 till his death in 1993 at the ripe young age of 83,1 am very fortunate to be part of this great legacy. I continue to learn and teach the great lessons of my culture and honor the past, not just remember it! As Mario's godfather Arturo Andrade told him, Mario passed down to me: ""Remember the culture you represent. It is one born of suffering and inhumanity. The music that was born of this injustice represents the coming together of many great cultures that you carry inside of you and give to the people when you play. That is the triumph. This coming together lives in you and all of us through the music."

**"To know one's ancestors is to live forever" - Bantu-Congolese proverb**